

ace
books

G-625
50c

TO OUTFRAN DOOMSDAY

LOST ON A PLANET OF PROGRAMMED CHAOS

Kenneth Bulmer



First Book Publication

THE END OF A WORLD'S CIVILIZATION

When hard-luck spaceman Jack Waley crashlanded on the planet Kerim, he found a world thrown into fearful chaos by the anger of its quasi-god Pe'Ichen. For the mysterious, unseen Pe'Ichen showered his people with jewelry, weapons, clothing . . . but no longer would he provide them with necessities such as food and shelter. The grand houses of Kerim, which had always repaired themselves for as long as anyone could remember, now lay crumbling and falling, hazards to anyone venturing near them.

Yet these were only the symptoms of a far deadlier peril which shadowed this once-bright planet . . . a peril which bumbling Jack Waley would ultimately have to face alone, with an entire world's fate hanging in the balance.

KENNETH BULMER

Novels available in Ace editions Include:

NO MAN'S WORLD (F-104)

THE WIZARD OF STARSHIP POSEIDON (F-209)

THE MILLION YEAR HUNT (F-285)

DEMONS' WORLD (F-289)

LAND BEYOND THE MAP (M-111)

WORLDS FOR THE TAKING (F-396)

To Outrun Doomsday

KENNETH BULMER

ACE BOOKS, INC.
1120 Avenue of the Americas
New York, N.Y. 10036

TO OUTFRAN DOOMSDAY

Copyright ©, 1967, by Kenneth Bulmer

All Rights Reserved

Cover by Kelly Freas

Printed in U.S.A.

I

SOON SUMMER would bring the roses jostling and bursting with color over the pergola where now sere stalks entwined like the discarded ropes of winter. The high snows shrank on six of the seven Mountains of Manicoro and soon jesting white-throated water would sparkle into rivulets and darken the winter-drugged land with richness. Once again this world decked herself with life.

The prospect filled Kerith with sadness.

She tapped her crystal-slipped foot with moody uncertainty on the stone flags where green moss sought with agile tacky fingers for the ants and beetles scavenging for crumbs scattered from the breakfast table at Kerith's side. The table had been set daintily on the terrace where the first of the day's sunshine could reach and the eye could find refreshment in the beauties of the walled garden. Now those beauties, that sunshine, that promise of abundant life to be—even the absorbed hurrying of the insects—merely mocked.

There were always more ants and more beetles in a never-ending stream of life scuttling avidly to feed the patient moss; once upon a time weed-killer would have been put

down to clean the flags—but not now. Petulantly Kerith consigned the insects to their fate. At least they were more fortunate than the people of her land—they bred freely and they did not know the nature of their end.

Her slender hand, whitely delicate and unjeweled, lifted the last of her milk. Her long throat stretched as she drank, bared and defenseless. Without hindrance or belt or ornament her azure gown clung about her figure. Radiant, she was, like the first of the roses of summer not yet come to full bloom, palpitant, dewy, unsure.

Jarfon of Trewes broke his biscuit with a single hard snap and his bearded lips closed over strong even teeth. He masticated deliberately, tight muscles moving rhythmically beneath his hard roughened skin.

A sip of milk, a swallow, and then: "No one regrets more than I do, my lady, the necessity of our situation. But we must go on with courage. The messenger—"

"Courage!" The Princess Kerith grimaced. Her fingers crumbled a biscuit for the ants beneath her chair. "My people do not lack courage. What I question is the need for it."

"But we must face our destiny with—"

"I know." Her golden-red hair stirred and swirled a net of rosy light about her head as she stood up swiftly. "With courage and dignity, with nobility and calm—like these poor blind scuttling ants beneath my heel!"

"Not so, my lady!" Jarfon of Trewes rose also, as was demanded in courtesy to the presence of any woman, be she ruler of all Brianon or no, his hard dark face showing unhappiness before the agony of this girl-queen. "The ants know nothing of their death and so they continue to act until the moment of death. We, as human beings, cannot do less."

"The messenger, Jarfon?"

"Has not arrived."

She gripped the back of her chair. "I had hoped, this time—"

"The woman was only ten days overdue. We pin our hopes on fragile facts when such a small irregularity causes us this pain at its failure."

Kerith sighed with the black despair that shrouded all the bright land of Brianon.

"There is much to be done today—" She stopped speaking and a look of self-disgust marred her delicate features. "No, Jarfon. That is all pretense and well you know it. We manufacture work for our hands and hope it will occupy our minds. But of what use is it all?"

"One day, my lady, one day—"

"We hope—but after nineteen years hope becomes a mockery."

Jarfon of Trewes picked up his short royal blue cape and slung it about his shoulders by its golden clasps; the day had begun brightly but summer was not here yet, and the wind was off the seven Mountains of Manicoro where the snows still capped those ancient summits. He tried to find words of comfort.

"Nineteen years is a long time, my lady, to you, for it is all your life span. But I have waited for only a third of my life. Despite all, I still hope."

"And you go on, with courage." Kerith smiled at him, a smile that made of the words no mockery but a warm friendly compact between two people prepared to face the end with dignity and courage—like the ants.

"The houses along ninety-seventh avenue are no longer tenatable," Jarfon of Trewes said after a pause. "We must rehouse the people—"

"As my chief minister of state I know I can leave all those affairs with you, Jarfon. If the houses do not repair themselves there is nothing left for us to do but move the people out. . . . I hope there will be no hardship."

Jarfon of Trewes knew she did not refer to physical hardship, for such animal-like habits had long departed from this land of Brianon. But—"None can look upon the homes they, and their families before them, have lived in for hundreds of years without sorrow when they see the buildings collapse and fall. Some people cling to material comforts now that the tragedy is upon us in ways they would have derided before—before you were born."

"I was born . . ." Kerith swallowed. "Yes."

"You were the last, my lady. . . ."

"The last . . . Oh, how I wish that I had not been! Not to have been born; not to know the agony my people suffer; not to suffer with them. . . . Why was I born into this world only to have to die? Where is the sense in that?"

"Nobody asked to be born, my lady. . . . But once we are here we must face that as a fact and act as though our actions had meaning—"

"Meaning!" She turned a rounded shoulder on him and walked stiffly to the balustrade encircling the terrace. Here a giant scarlet and emerald stychaphon climbed spirally around the pilaster, its broad leaves damp and shining, its scarlet mouths open and waiting, inviting. A blue bottle fly alighted on a petal seeking the nectar within, and the petals folded: the fly was gone.

"What meaning to the fly could there be in that?" demanded Kerith darkly. "His death solves nothing."

"The stychaphon, could it talk, could give you the best answer, my lady."

"But the fly, Jarfon, the fly! Of course the plant fed and will grow the stronger—but the fly. What of the victim?"

"The victim's role is no less important than the victor's."

"This is all easy platitudinous talk. Anyone can see that if there are to be victors there must be victims. But why must we men and women of Brianon be the victims? Why has this fate been singled out for us? *Why?*"

Jarfon of Trewes could not meet the blazing look of agony in the eyes of his young girl-queen. "If we knew that, my lady, we might find the answer that would bring children once more into the world."

Beyond the russet wall of the sheltered garden rose the Spring Palace, a luminous pile designed for fleeting occupancy during the brief springtime of this planet when life girded itself for summer's splendors. Heavy-headed spatulate-leaved trees embowered the crystal spires of the palace. Doves cooed somnolently from the eaves. Signs of activity showed around the lower terraces among the brown crumbling earth where ranked rows of blended flowers soon would bloom. Here the sun picked a pin-bright glint of metal from the swinging blade of a gardener already

at work, the machine's globular orange body moving slowly about its tasks with a mechanical exhaustion more frightening than any fatigue of bone and muscle.

Three or four humans worked alongside the mechanical gardener, giving their time and labor freely for love of their girl-queen, their movements only slightly less rapid and efficient than the mechanical's.

"Why do we bother?" asked Kerith, watching the stychaphon slowly distend its flower petals once again. The scarlet glowed invitingly in the morning sunshine.

"Because we are men," said Jarfon of Trewes. He brisked across the terrace, forcing his animation. "As you said, my lady, there is much to be done today. After the rehousing the Guild of Frontiersmen have an audience. Then—"

"Very well, my friend. I am ready." Kerith gathered her azure gown about her. Her crystal slippers tinkled bravely on the flags. "Despite all, we must go on."

A keening nerve-irritating wail began fibrillating the air with alarm.

"Predakkers," said Jarfon of Trewes unnecessarily.

Instinctively they both looked into the bright morning sky, blinking their eyes.

"It would be better for you to go inside at once, my lady." He took her arm in a grip common danger made respectful.

"Yes, Jarfon. You are right. To die—we must all die, as well we know—but not in the talons of a Predakker."

Kerith shivered at the thought.

They hurried along the ochre brick path from the terrace. Men and women, gardeners, people about their morning tasks, all scampered for the safety of the walls of the Spring Palace. The alarm on every face stamped a real dread on the scene in the limpid air with the rays of the sun still burning off the last of the night mist. No one ran. But no one dawdled.

The alarm siren wailed and dwindled into silence.

From the ceiling high windows of the Pleasant Poppy Room, Kerith was relieved that stout walls interposed between her and the Predakkers, for she watched with dis-

taste at what must follow. . . . The walls of the room had been painted in flowing color and distraught line, poppy on poppy, stalk and leaf entwined, a riotous explosion of abundant life. More than once she had considered altering the decor; but mere frivolous house redecoration schemes could not be indulged in now when the people's houses refused to repair themselves.

Over the flat head of a nearby lichen tree two black dots shot into view, small and distant, but coming on with defiant speed.

"There!" said Jarfon of Trewes.

"Have you glasses?" asked Kerith.

"A moment, my lady." Jarfon of Trewes looked about the room. On a spindly-legged table stood a carafe of warm Fal-lonian wine and half a dozen slender wafer-glass goblets, the light sheening them with rainbows. He walked quickly across, his feet soundless on the purple and crimson pile; he selected two goblets, placed them on their sides on the table, their rims and bases touching.

He stood for perhaps half a second as a man stands in deep and introspective thought; then he reached down briskly and picked up the field-glasses from the table, and took them across to the Princess Kerith.

"Thank you, Jarfon." She put them to her eyes, adjusting the set screw, brought the two ominous black dots into focus. At once, against the hazy blue, they jumped into enormous raucous horrid life.

Again Jarfon of Trewe's hand on her shoulder was the hand of a comrade, steadying her.

"Predakkers are not a pretty sight, my lady."

"No." She handed the binoculars to her chief minister and he bent his dark brows over the eyepieces.

"Two young ones," he said harshly. "A new pair. Out for a quick cheap meal before they think about hatching young." His knuckles stretched and whitened on the glasses. "I'd like to find the devils' nest. An expedition would soon sear the earth of their evil—"

"Why should we bother, Jarfon? When we are—are gone, the Predakkers, at the least, will remain."

"A noble sentiment, but one I cannot share."

He handed her the field glasses, but at the speed the birds of prey were making through the air glasses soon became unnecessary. The Princess Kerith swallowed. The Predakkers were large, powerful brutes, capable of lifting a whole sheep unaided, capable of crushing a man's skull and dashing out his brains. All scales and fangs and claws with blued leathery necks and scarlet gaping beaks, forked tongues flickering, their wings thrashing a heavy diapason of thunder, each beat like the sound of a butcher's cleaver going through meat.

Kerith felt no fear, safe behind these crystal walls. But repugnance at what was unbeautiful, cruel, malefic in her land fraught her thoughts with sorrow. She stood straight and slim before the windows, one hand grasping the looped ivory curtain, the other clenched at her breast.

Abruptly Jarfon of Trewes slapped the field glasses again to his eyes, twisted the set screw. His face ridged, tautened, yellow patches spreading on his cheekbones.

"What is it, Jarfon?"

He jerked the glasses down. Kerith looked down from where the pair of Predakkers orbited momentarily now, seeking prey. Up the long winding ochre brick road, with a shroud of dust clogging his heels, a horseman galloped stretched out along his mount's neck, his cape lifting like clipped wings behind him. Kerith could see clearly the white triangle of his face beneath the low brimmed hat.

"The messenger!" said Jarfon of Trewes, on a breath.

Soundlessly the horse galloped on, a distant tiny figure lonely in a vast landscape. The first Predakker checked its orbiting flight. Its sheening wings slanted.

"No . . ." whispered the Princess Kerith of Brianon.

The irony of the situation was all too apparent. Not, Kerith realized with a shudder, that the messenger, urging his mount on with frantic desperation, would relish the irony of it; but they had waited for the messenger knowing his tidings would bring them no joy, and now here he was on a fool's errand and likely to be killed in the doing of it. Like any sane person, Kerith hated waste.

"If he can reach the milestone unscathed," her chief minister growled with repressed anger and impatience, "he

should be within reach of our cover. I am glad now, my lady, that I insisted this year that a company of your guard was stationed at the Spring Palace--"

"Yes, yes, Jarfon." Kerith jerked in frantic tenseness at the ivory curtain, her teeth biting into her lip the moment she had finished speaking. "You were right--as always."

Jarfon of Trewes watched that hurtling figure out there on the wide dusty brick road and his face, for all its strong-bearded power, for a moment showed his regret that he was three times the age of his princess. A haunted melancholy engulfed him as the messenger rode for life. They were all riding for life, here in doomed Brianon, and at the winning post leered a grinning skull.

Into the opal courtyard below the seventy-nine steps leading up to the west portal of the spring Palace seven guardsmen ran out into the sunshine and shadows of the opaline mosaics. They moved with quick, neat gestures. Each man acted with a precision drilled in long hours on the barrack square. Yet the result was not so much of painstaking drill as of the ingrained habit patterns of these people of Brianon for the rounded whole, the neat effect, the perfect performance of every tiny everyday act.

Against the well-cut yellow of their tunics and the classical curve of their bronze helmets, the black and blued steel heft of their weapons showed like a bruise on a woman's cheek.

"They can nail the brute if he crosses the milestone marker," Jarfon of Trewes said, with little satisfaction.

The first Predakker slid down the sky chute.

The sergeant of the guard detail gave his order to fire in a voice that reached plainly all the way up the seventy-nine steps. Seven forefingers pressed. Seven sears clicked. Seven bows released their stored energy in a whiplash of recurvature. Seven bolts flashed.

Somewhere out in the neat fields bordering the ochre brick road between the mile marker and the courtyard, seven bolts gouged earth, to burrow deep into the rich brown soil, to be turned up with a grumble, perhaps, months hence by a gardener hoeing between the rows.

"Too short!" groaned Kerith.

"A gesture only." Jarfon of Trewes felt the itch himself to draw an arbalest, to sight, to press the trigger. But no arbalest of Brianon would reach the swiftly descending bird of prey at that distance.

"Not a scrap of shelter—" Kerith spoke with self-contempt. "We must see that shelters are erected, Jarfon, along the road. The Predakkers grow every season more arrogant, more venturesome. I fear this will not be the last—"

"Look!"

The Predakker half-folded his wings. His long descent turned from a glide into a direct plunge. His mouth gaped scarlet. The messenger flung up one arm and tried to avoid the blow, tried to slide down under his horse's belly. But fangs sliced and claws struck.

Kerith turned away.

Tears stood like pearls on her cheeks.

"He's down," Jarfon of Trewes said in a dead voice.

"Waste," Kerith said, hating herself, hating the whole pitiful plight her land suffered, hating the Predakker. "Poor man . . ."

A brighter stain sprinkled darkly on the ochre brick road.

The horse galloped on alone, its nostrils wide, blowing, its eyes two rolling fireballs, its legs striding with galvanic fear.

A dark woman dressed in a simple green gown entered the Pleasant Poppy Room. Her face with its round flat features and smooth skin showed her alarm and pity; but her dumpling figure moved with tender firmness.

"My lady—come away. . . . I have a little warming drink put by—"

Kerith turned and put one slender hand on the woman's ready arm.

"Rowena . . . Dear Rowena. Yes . . . Thank you."

Jarfon of Trewes put down the field glasses. He nodded at Rowena. "Yes, Rowena, thank you. The Princess has been upset. I shall see the delegation from the Guild of Frontiersmen and explain. Do not let your mistress agitate herself again. . . . Let me know when she is fully recovered."

"Thank you, sir. That will be best. I'm sure they will understand."

As the Princess Kerith left the Pleasant Poppy Room on the arm of her old nurse, Jarfon of Trewes pushed a hand through his beard. The Frontiersmen would understand. They'd have to understand.

All Brianon owed love and affectionate allegiance to The Princess Kerith. Yes, the Frontiersmen would understand.

But who could understand the calamity that had befallen Brianon? Who in all this land understood that?

II

STARSHIPS are no places in which to lay an intrigue—and be discovered.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Jack Waley.

He crouched in a far corner of the deepest hold of the Solterran Starship *Bucentaure* and hugged his knees and waited to be found by the chief engineer and that wicked wrench.

It had all seemed so easy. Maisie d'Angelo—the sweet-faced girl with the dangerous figure traveling with an old stick of an aunt—had pouted one evening in the starwalk and sighed and held his arm tightly. "Oh, Jack," she'd said artlessly. "Here am I stuck down with my silly kind old aunt at the third officer's table with not a soul of any interest at all. I do think they could have seated me at the captain's table."

"Of course they should," Jack Waley had said with easy gallantry, his arm around her waist and his mind on the next adventurous movement. "Nothing's too good for you, my little starflower."

"Oh, Jack . . ."

He did not mention that he had been seated at the fourth purser's table. That would have sounded ungenerous and critical. And Jack Waley had not as yet reached the critical state with this girl.

"I mean, that horrid redheaded bite—young lady, Diana Darkster, sits queening it at the captain's table. And some fat slobbering old dear from Solvenus. And I'm pining away at the third officer's table." She moved her elbow a little so he could rearrange his arm. "It's just not fair, Jack; really it isn't."

"Of course it isn't, my stellar poppy."

"Well, aren't you going to do something about it?" She turned abruptly and a sharp-edged elbow struck his wrist, dislodging his arm, as he was about to assay a bolder move. She looked poutingly at him. "I mean, Jack, dear, you *do* like me, don't you?"

"Of course I do, Maisie! What a silly question. Just let's walk along here where the stars show brighter. . . ."

"That's only because the ship lights are out, there. I don't think a *nice* young lady would sit with you in the dark, Jack Waley."

Waley held himself down with an intense effort compounded of irritation and intended satisfaction. She wasn't going to cheat him now.

He was a young gallant, a blade about space, a fellow who conquered when he could and forgot to wonder about the reckoning until it was presented. So far in his twenty-odd years of life he had always scraped up the wherewithal to foot the bill. He did not think Maisie d'Angelo would prove expensive. If she wanted to sit at the captain's table—then he'd arrange that and take a handsome reward.

Maisie pulled her light synthisilk ship's wrap more tightly about her bare shoulders above the frothy pink gown. Somewhere inside the ship the ball sounded in heady noise, the popping of corks, the rhythmic thud and grind of canned music, the surf-bellow of competing voices. She looked lovely and desirable and for Waley a little chicanery was small beer to pay for such a prize.

"Don't you worry, my little starflower. I'll have you sitting at the captain's table or my name's not Jack Waley."

"Oh, Jack . . . Will you?" Then, more sharply: "But *can* you . . . ? How . . . ?"

"Leave that to me. Come and sit down on this seat a moment while I think about it—"

"That's all you want to sit down for—to think about it?"

"We-ell . . ." said Jack Waley.

And so here he was, hiding in the ship's hold while the chief engineer searched the ship for him, brandishing that hugely horrid wrench. Knock a man's head clean off, that wrench could. Maim him for life. Waley hugged his knees and quivered. Damn all pudding-headed, gorgeous-bodied girls in the galaxy!

For of course, all smiles and politeness and spit-polished hair he'd wheeled up to Miss Diana Darkster, who had regarded him as though someone had left the lid off a swill-bin. A red-haired chit she was, sure enough—although no doubt she'd prefer to call herself auburn—with a body that, to Waley's surprise on closer inspection than that afforded by a casual glance, proved to be more voluptuous and streamlined than all Miss Maisie d'Angelo's allurements. Her face, without makeup, radiated an inner beauty he found disconcerting.

All that, of course, merely made her acceptance of his story not only more likely but inevitable.

A morning's watch had sufficed to enable him to introduce his ploy into the normal drift of conversation.

"Marjoram IV?" Diana Darkster said with a queenly lift of an eyebrow. "No. I've never visited the place."

"Why, of course not!" Waley showed horror on his round cheeky face. "I mean—well—look at you! We all know what happens to people if they stay too long on Marjoram IV and catch—well, I won't go into details."

"Do we, Mister Waley?"

Waley allowed stunning surprise to suffuse his innocent face with profound shock. He always prided himself on the subtle shift of his facial muscles doing that one.

"Don't tell me—really—you mean—?"

They were sitting in loungers back from the shuffleboard court and every now and then a plastic disc would come sliding between their feet. Diana kicked one back now and said tartly: "I mean I don't know, Mister Waley."

"Well, of course, I understand. It's not the sort of thing a well-bred girl like you would run across. Silly of me to mention it. I really don't know why I should have thought of

it just now, except that it's very contagious and—well, you know—some people just look as though they—well, no names—ha, ha—but, well, you know . . .”

“I'm afraid I don't, Mister Waley.”

But he was getting to her. A straight frown sat between those regal eyebrows. She picked a corner of the microreel on her lap. The shadows played down on her face, softening the curt line of her lips, sweeping gently below her eyes so that in reflected light they shone brighter. She really was a stunner. . . . Right out of Waley's class, though. Waley felt perennial regret that he could never be more than he had been born to. . . . Never more than one of the multi-billions of the galaxy armed for life with half an education, no understanding of why education existed and with no hope of ever finding out.

She rose in a fluid motion that made Waley catch his breath. She could not be more than nineteen. “Thank you for an interesting conversation. . . .” Vaguely, she walked away.

Waley chuckled, forgetting his own inferiority in the conviction that she was hooked. Now, for some fun. Maisie—well, the prize was hardly worth the effort for a man like Waley. Half the fun lay in the organization. . . .

Organization. He groaned again there in the deepest hold of *Bucentaure* and cursed the day he'd clapped eyes on Maisie d'Angelo.

At dinner that ship-night a vacant seat stared ominously between the captain and his first engineer. The woman from Solvenus, too, was missing. Maisie was speaking animatedly to a steward. Diana stalked in without a glance for the captain's end of the dining saloon, peremptorily followed a steward as he led her to the third engineer's table. Maisie tripped lightly the full length of the dining room, her gown rustling about her, her bare shoulders gleaming under the fluorescents despite liberal powder, and she sat at the captain's table beside the captain. The chief engineer, a thick-barreled, plug-ugly man with an unprectable tic in his left eye, glared at her, mumbled something and went on eating.

Jack Waley sat back to his steak with a feeling of well-

being. He had organized a little coup and it had worked perfectly.

Well—it *had* worked perfectly.

That was before the chief engineer had taken it upon himself to inquire solicitously after the health of the plump woman from Solvenus who had boarded herself up in her cabin.

Why the beetle-browed curdle-brained gold-striped buffoon hadn't let well enough alone, all the devils of space couldn't know. Jack Waley would have left the affair there but the chief engineer fancied himself a man of the galaxy. The plump widow of Solvenus appeared to him a downy bird for a passage.

Poor Jack Waley. He'd had no idea what was brewing for him in the melting pot of retribution when he incautiously walked past the widow's cabin, humming cheerfully, en route for Maisie's cabin. The aunt he would deal with next, now that Maisie was so languorously appreciative of him. . . .

The cabin door flew open. The widow, ruffled up in a monstrous dressing gown that made her look like a gale-blown marquee, tearfully trying to eject the chief engineer—the chief engineer beet-red of face, stammering with the dammed eloquence of a hearty man before a lady, standing his ground, grinding his uniform cap into pulverized shapes in his engineer's hands. . . .

"Oh, lord!" groaned Jack Waley.

"She told me, you vile, horrid, deceitful man!" The widow had not forgotten Venus-learned cusswords. She used them now.

"But, madam—please—this is impossible—"

"Impossible is it, you—you male typhoid Annie!"

"Mary," said the engineer automatically. "But what are you talking about for . . . for . . . for Pete's sake!" He had had to tread over shifting mental ground there.

Waley hung on at the corner, fascinated, as a rabbit before a snake.

"I've heard about men like you! Vile! Filth! Get away! I'll call the purser!"

The chief engineer flung down his cap. "If Charlie Rob-

bins comes near me before I've had it out with you I'll screw his head down between his shoulders!"

"Oh!" The widow recoiled.

The engineer thrust forward.

"What is the matter, madam? Remember what you—what we said? This is a long voyage—we're both lonely people—"

She clapped her hands over her ears.

"Keep away from me, you walking lecherous horrid heap of contagion! I've heard all about Marjoram IV!"

"That's done it!" said Jack Waley.

"Marjoram IV?"

"What else? You've been there, haven't you? Yes, go on, try to deny it. That's your way. . . . You and your lovey-dovey talk . . . And all the time you've stayed on Marjoram IV and then you pester me. . . . OH!" She rolled up her eyes. "I do believe I'm going to faint."

"Here, let me help you—"

"Get away, you blood-sucking leech! You ghoul! You vampire! You—you—Ohhh!"

The chief engineer danced on his cap in his rage. He tried to grab the good lady's arm and caught instead a great handful of ruffles and lace and synthisilk. Something tore. The plump widow screeched as those wingless birds of Pettigrew's Fifth Planet screech when they lay their single huge egg every seventeen years.

"But what about Marjoram IV? What's the matter with the place?"

"You ask that! You!" Her cheeks shook; her nose sprayed her tears; her hands scrabbled at the overflowing profundity of lace at her breast covering what was already embalmed in covering. "I couldn't bring myself to repeat the horror of it! Go away! Go away, you horrid man—"

"There's nothing wrong with Marjoram IV, madam! I live there! *It's my home!*"

"Ooooh!" And the poor lady swooned clean away.

The chief engineer stood raging futilely at air and then, turning his congested face corridorward, saw Waley. He colored even more. "What the hell do you want?"

"N-nothing." Jack Waley sidled off. "Just passing."

"Well, pass on."

Being Jack Waley, Waley could not resist saying: "Is something the matter with the lady?"

"No," said the chief engineer. "She just likes sleeping half in the corridor." Then he must have remembered he was a ship's officer, for he added more moderately: "She has had a shock. Help me put her on her bed."

"Right."

And so the poor ravished soul awoke from her swoon at the moment the chief engineer, holding her under the shoulders, and Waley, holding her legs, deposited her on her bed. She looked up. Her eyes flew widely open. Her mouth gaped and her dentures rattled. She gasped for air, struggling to draw breath as an airpump struggles on a frosty day.

"You—!" she managed to strangle out. Her face turned green. "Get away! Diana told me what you told her about Marjoram IV! You're all in the plot! Help! Murder! Help! Help!"

The captain with a steward at his shoulder appeared in the doorway. His level eyes kindled fire, so it seemed to Jack Waley, as he crisped his personality onto the scene.

"What the blue-blazes is going on here? Chief?"

"Uh—that is, sir—huh—"

Then the Chief realized what his would-be paramour had said. He swung a bilious eyes at Jack Waley, already halfway out the door.

"You told them something about Marjoram IV—here, my lad! I want a word with you!"

But Jack Waley had gone.

And now here he was, miserably crouching in the hold of the ship whilst a crazed chief engineer roamed looking for him with a jokester-slaying wrench and blood in his eye.

"Oh, Lord!" groaned Jack Waley.

He found half an orange in one pocket of his drably smart business suit and began to suck it miserably.

If only he knew what that beautiful ninny Diana Darkster had told the fat widow. If only he knew what psychological guilts the chief engineer had driving him on. If only he knew—no. Oh, no! Far better for his peace of mind if

he didn't know. He sucked the orange and wondered if a death in space was as quick and painless as it was reported to be. If he could find a refuse chute he could slip down it into the endless dark.

He became maudlin. Poor old Jack Waley. That was all the galaxy thought of him. Just a bundle of refuse to be tossed idly into space. Get rid of Jack Waley, that was what everyone had always said. He's no good.

Why, even his father and mother had had second thoughts about him from the time he could walk.

When he'd learned to talk they'd been sure.

Poor old Jack Waley. If he wasn't a man and a blade about the galaxy he swore he'd let a significant tear glisten down his cheek.

Poor old Jack Waley. The only claim to distinction he possessed was being born on Earth and in this spiral arm where men and women from Solterra were fighting and trading and scheming and learning their way in toward the mysterious, shrouded, fiery, frightening hub—that distinction could still pay dividends. Half an education, did he think he'd had? That was a laugh. He'd been turned off at college at the tender age of sixteen and from then on anything he learned, at the government's expense or his own, would be strictly self-help. Only a man at the extremity of want would take a job as he had done and be thankful to get it.

In riding herd on a cargo of computers destined for outlandish outworlds, in pretending with a smile and a glib line of glossy-primer information that he understood a computer's function, in brazenly trying to sell the confounded mechanical brains to people without enough to know when they were being conned, he was showing the flag of Ter-ran culture on alien worlds—and earning a crust to keep his soul decently between his ribs.

A fortnight of sketchy classes at the firm's training school—quick trips outside when the going became tough, skiving off before time, uncrackable excuses for unconscionable latenesses—had supposedly taught him how to sell computers. Messrs. Hardacre and Clossop, hand-in-glove with the government's exobiology and alien cultures and export departments of the ministry, trained their young men with poverty

and a fear-filled future as goads and lures beyond the price of honest selling. "Don't worry, son," they'd said. "Don't you worry. Just smile and stand the drinks and look as though you know you're a doormat and don't mind too much at being wiped off on by dirty boots—take it all and you'll take the orders, too. We're selling a good machine here."

Ha.

That had been the first lesson. Don't get taken in by other people's sales pitches. Not even if—especially if—they are your own firm's technical brightboys. Would they admit they were trying to peddle botch-ups in the galaxy? You're right. Jack Waley groaned again and shivered and shook as a metal door slid open in the bulkhead opposite his staring eyes.

He knew what he would see when that door opened fully.

The chief engineer, bloated like a frog, face a mulled purple claret, that doomsday wrench poised aloft to debrain, degut, decapitate Jack Waley—Waley groaned again and tried to claw his way through the ship's side.

Damn Maisie d'Angelol

Damn Diana Darkster!

Damn that old pudding basin from Solvenus!

And damn damn damn the chief engineer and his murderin' wrench. . . .

III

As JACK WALEY quaked and quivered watching the opening door in the deepest hold of the starship *Bucentaure*, the master of that interstellar company strode up and down his control room like a pekinese on a leash attempting to try accounts with a loftily uninterested Great Dane. Captain Rat-tray was a small man. His uniform overflowed on him. Yet the captain had traded among the starlanes for all of seven-

ty years now; he was hale and hearty and possessed of a grim, no-nonsense way that had bulldogged him successfully from Terra to Tetrarchus, from Alcippe to Zanothro. He knew his job and he was no man to let another interfere with that.

"And when you find him tell him from me I'll rip off the stripes on his sleeve myself!" The captain's face thawed into merely a frown as he foresaw the pleasure he would have in reaching out to strip away the chief engineer's coveted emblems of rank.

He snatched the handmike up and clapped his mouth to it. "How's that number three engine coming along, Mister Farthingale?"

A snorting ripple of sound corkscrewed from the speaker alongside. It sounded something like: ". . . flailing drive turbs flailing dynamometer input in the flailing squeez-che-fulobbijoy."

That last couldn't be right. "What did you say?" screeched the captain.

But the speaker coughed and twanged and sullenly refused an answer.

The captain turned a liverish eye on young Mister Thwaites, the seventh officer. "Go down there, youngster," he said, breathing thinly through his nostrils. "And find the second engineer and tell him from me that if he doesn't get his rusty-barnacled-ill-gotten engines going in five minutes flat I'll shove his input-turnup screw in where it will do the most good! Scat!"

"Y-Yess-sir!" stammered the boy, scared. He vanished like a terrier down a rabbit hole.

The ship shook. The deck lurched and a female technical officer fell against a panel and sparked off a constellation of fizzing sparks and fizzing curses.

"That's the second engine going!" yelled the astrogator.

"It's going nowhere when I lay my hands on the Chief!" The captain danced a jig of impassioned anger. "My ship! My lovely *Bucentaure*! Shoved all over whatever hellish hyperspace that fatuous fool of a chief engineer's pushed us into now!" The captain stumbled as the ship lurched again.

He stubbed his nose against the astrogator's pedestal comp and stinging water sprang to his eyes.

"You nincompoop!" He yelled at the white-faced astrogator. "Can't you take your confounded moth-eaten tools somewhere else?"

The astrogator had not enough courage and too much sense to point out that his pedestal comp had been screwed into place when the ship had been built.

The captain fingered his nose and wiped away tears.

The ship lurched and shuddered and the starboard lights went out. The blue emergencies did not come on. Everyone in the control room looked half-faced, light striking down brightly from the port side, the starboard black as the back of the coalsack.

Somewhere the flat smell of burning insulation charred through the air, furred mouths and wrinkled nostrils.

A girl radarscope tech began to cry. "I've been in space for ten years now," she sniffed. "Nothing like this has ever happened before."

"I've been in space seventy," the captain said nastily. "And I'll give you the same advice I give 'em all. Lay back. Relax."

The girl's sobs crescendoed.

"It's beginning to look serious, sir." The second officer's face, large and moon-shaped and sweating, lowered over the captain like a tethered balloon.

"Come down here, confound you!" said the captain. "Of course it's serious. My nose will be sore for a week."

"If the artgravs go—"

The captain opened his mouth to reply; then he and all those who were not strapped in took off under their last movement's impetus, drifting, turning giddily end for end. The captain said venomously: "Why couldn't you keep your mouth shut, mister? Now look what you've done!"

"Mel" said the second, offended. "It's not me. It's the chief engineer!"

"Yes." The captain caught a stanchion in one hand and a passing girl signals tech in the other. "Hang on, girl, or you'll take my arm out of its socket."

"Oh, sir—I" she wailed.

The ship shuddered, doing a shimmy in space. Artificial gravity came on and snapped off unpredictably. The seventh officer stumbled back from the engine room, his face blued and two teeth missing from a fall. His hair stood waving like seafronds. "No one knows where the Chief is, sir. And everything's overloading and running to hell! The automatics have failed. The second engineer wants to cut everything and eject into true space—sir. . . ."

The captain tried to dance his passionate jig of frustrated anger, forgot he was in free fall, and shot across the control room like a teen-aged rocketeer. He finished with his nose wedged down behind the big computer.

When they got him out he looked at the astrogator.

The astrogator shivered.

The captain said in a tired, old-man's voice: "Cut. Keep essentials running. Take her out into space." He found a bench and sat down like a tall tree folding. He snapped the lapstraps across. "And bang goes my bonus for the voyage and any hope of promotion in the next twenty years." He hooked his fingers. "Just wait until I get my hands on that chief engineer—" The rest of his remarks caused the two lady officer-signals to remove themselves with pink-cheeked alacrity from his vicinity.

Mister Thwaites began his second journey to find Mister Farthingale through the resounding chaos of the *Bucentaure*.

Long before he had reached even the first bulkhead door into the engine room—long before even the first of all the complex series of operations to take the ship from hyperspace into normal space could be begun—long before the crew had begun to feel real gut-freezing fear, the ship blew.

The ship blew.

How then describe the opening to nothingness of the warmth and light and air of human habitation?

From the fetus of womblike comfort to space-savaged death—the ship blew. Metal shivered and sundered. Air frothed and vanished. Heat dissipated and was cold. Light struggled weakly and was lost in the multiplicity of the stellar spectra. The ship blew.

Here and there in that mightily-puny bulk, pockets of air and light and warmth yet remained, for a heartbeat, for

the torturing time to scream in the face of death. Some, a pitiful few, persisted for a longer time.

The control room, as a unit, remained in being.

Some of the lifeboats—where loving couples kissed, as always by the lifeboats—remained as viable means of space transport.

A few holds retained their air.

When the ship blew . . .

Poor old Jack Waley.

In those last unknowing moments of freedom before the ship lurched drunkenly into her last fandango on racing uncontrolled engines and a hyperspace field that shuddered in and out of countless alien dimensions like a demented yo-yo, Jack Waley pushed himself up, stiff-legged, his back sliding up the metal hull. He gulped. The door eased open silently. Light stronger than that in his prison-refuge struck through and cast the upraised shadow of a monstrous wrench distortedly across the deck.

Waley moaned, whimpering.

The door smashed back. Like an ogre brandishing his masculinity above a captured harem the chief engineer bestrode the entrance. Waley's overwrought brain played tricks—was there fire and brimstone breathing from the Chief's nostrils? Did live coals really fly from his spitting eyes?

"You!Waley! C'mere!"

Waley ducked. The metal hull past his left ear rang like a gong. The wrench turned in the Chief's hand, skidded, struck shrewdly back.

"Oowww!" yelled the chief engineer, dancing wildly on one foot, grasping his shin in both cupped hands. "I'll be a cripple for life!"

Head down, arms raking blindly before him, feet a blur, Jack Waley fled from that savaged haven of refuge, skittered like a fractious colt along the gangways of the ship. He kept falling from side to side. The deck did unconscionable things. He knew he could feel his heart palpitating in his mouth and his lungs were flatter than a freshly-machine-produced paper bag—but . . . But surely he wasn't unable to keep his feet as ineptly as this?

He fell full length and the Chief tripped and fell on top of him. Both men gasped for air, their faces an interesting color, their voices trying to shriek words of reproach and vengeance and fear. They croaked at each other like obese frogs on a moonless pool's edge.

They rolled, tangled together, toward the lifeboat deck. The Chief's head thumped a stanchion. He recoiled.

"What the blue-tailed rings of Saturn is going on here?" He put his knee in Waley's mouth, levering himself up, the fight forgotten. His hold bit and he merely twitched his leg out of the way. "Cut it out, Waley—something's wrong with the ship!"

A young couple—she pulling her gown higher, he wiping his lips—stumbled from the shadows of a boat airlock.

From the deck, getting his wind back, Waley said on a gasp: "Maisie! How could you?"

Then everyone drifted off in free fall.

The chief engineer shouted: "You'd better get into the boats. I'll find out what's going on. . . ." Under his breath he finished: "Stupid deck officers can't even run a tin can like this without fouling something up."

He saw Waley. The blood flushed his eye—and then art-grav plumped them back to the deck, stunningly.

Screams, shouts, groans, the bedlam of people caught up in mind-twisting fear cannonaded through the ship—the sounds and sights they could not hear and see up there in the remoteness of the control cabin.

Waley dragged himself to a boat airlock and thumbed the controls. He had time to topple inward. He saw Maisie and her new paramour struggling to enter another lifeboat lock, other people crowding up, and he left the door open, shouting: "Hurry up! Plenty of room in this one!"

A thick-bodied man with graying hair, carrying a briefcase, forced his way toward Waley's boat. He had reached out a hand and almost touched the door when the ship blew.

For Jack Waley there came the feeling of being soundly kicked in the pants. As he fell he saw the airlock door snap shut with an irrevocable snap like a crocodile. Various colored lights lit up. A siren wailed. He lay on the rubber-

ized deck between the aisles of empty seats. The airlock doors were shut. The lifeboat was fulfilling its function as it had been programmed long ago against the contingencies of space. His head ached and the severe commuter-style interior of the lifeboat span around him, blurred at the edges. His nose was bleeding. He felt awful.

Through the hull of the ship an intense and torturing ululation whistled in a passionate embrace of hurtling metal and bruised air.

He knew what that meant.

The deceleration caught him completely unprepared.

His head, aching, wheezing, running at the nose, weeping from the eyes, ringing in the ears, screaming from rictus-distended mouth, struck a seat support.

Poor Jack Waley.

As the lifeboat set about making planetfall, poor Jack Waley was knocked cold.

IV

IN THIS MODERN AGE, with the men of Earth spreading in an Agag advance into the awesome delights of the galaxy, accidents to starships occurred with a frequency plotted on insurance graphs and computed in hard cash against soft lives. If a hundred million passengers were carried in perfect safety for every passenger killed off, the pundits of the accounts smiled and rubbed lubricious hands and left the concern of that one in a hundred million to the black-clad mourners at the graveside with the insurance check heavy in the balance of grief.

Amidst rolling roseate clouds of dreams Jack Waley saw, out of focus and slanting sideways with illusion, the figures of his father and mother—ebony clad—accepting the insurance check. A tear dropped a single splashing libation to his memory. "At last," he could hear his father saying in

that flat dead suburban voice—"at last the little so-and-so has repaid us for all we did for him."

"To think"—that would be his mother, pinched of cheek, washed out, with a horny forefinger from pressing household appliances—"to think of our little lad being in the newspapers and on the tv! I didn't have to wait to be served once today." A sniff, a lace-handkerchief gesture of valediction. "He was a good boy."

"Of course I wasn't!" shouted Jack Waley, starting up and blinking his eyes in strange orange light. "I was no good! Everyone knew it and everyone told me! They all said I'd come to a bad end. . . . And I did, I did. . . . Brains dashed out all over my best suit by that murdering chief engineer's wrench . . . Oh oh . . ."

"Kva shooley harusmith sjibonk," said a soft, cool and delightfully feminine voice.

"Huh?" said Jack Waley.

"Klay bruley mimi," said that heavenly voice again.

Waley blinked. He pushed a pointy elbow into soft mattresses and heaved up. Water filled his eyes and for a moment everything showed twice life-sized and spectrasplintered at the edges in violet and scarlet and green. He blinked. Yellow cascaded down and then orange and he could see.

She matched the voice.

"Yum," said Jack Waley, weakly. "Yum, yum."

Long dark shining hair feathered across his cheek as the girl moved back, her slanting, deeply-violet eyes wide, her low forehead creased in pretty consternation.

"Klao mihien hapol" she said, not quite steadily.

"Yum?" said a deeper, dark-brown voice from somewhere behind Waley's head; a voice of obvious power, uttering now an equally obvious question.

"Me," said Jack Waley with patient understanding that this was the beginning. "Me Jack Waley." He pressed a finger to his chest, to feel hair. He looked down in horror to find himself stark naked. Hastily he dragged the yellow sheet up about his neck.

The girl said something that might have been Jack Waley.

He pointed his finger at her, but did not touch her. Her saffron sheened gown looked to be sheer—that could be flesh-colored sheath-tight foundation garments under there; it could just as easily be girl. “You?” he said, inflecting the question outrageously.

She said: “Mimi.”

“Youyou,” said Waley. “Oh, well, we’ll persevere.”

With a name like that complications of the “Me Ugh, you Ogh,” type could become farcical. And, right now, dead and buried and with the insurance check buying a bigger tv set and a new car and a holiday on Solvenus, Jack Waley felt like a good laugh. It might set him up. It might make him begin to believe he wasn’t dead and buried.

But, of course, he was.

Completely.

He was down on an alien planet where not even the pidgin-English-gal-linga had penetrated. These people were trying to talk to him in their own language, and yet they must have dragged him from the wreck of the lifeboat and so known he was not of this planet—if they even knew what planets were. He might have crawled out of the boat and staggered here in a state of shock—but he doubted it. He knew well enough that Jack Waley was not the stuff of which heroes are made.

The girl brought a marvelous silver bowl of soup and Waley knocked the whole lot back and respectfully asked for more. His hunger had been in training.

They understood the basic request for food. They began from there. Soon Waley could repeat accurately most of the noun-names of the objects in the small hut. Beehive shaped, simply furnished, showing the effects of a primitive civilization, the hut yet conveyed a warm and ample sense of home. These people were far from being the worst that could happen to a man spacewrecked on an uncharted and alien planet.

In the days that followed Waley concentrated on the language. He considered himself less than half-educated. But he knew, also, in counterpoint, that his half-education of the modern day equaled the best technical education that could have been given to a boy in, say, the late twen-

tieth century. He might be short on knowing what made the galaxy tick, on understanding the background reasons for education; but empirically he had been equipped for life as he would lead it. And if that meant living down on an alien planet, then he would have a go at that, too.

The food at first made him a little sick.

He considered himself supremely lucky.

There had been no question of not eating. If he didn't eat— So he had eaten and had imbibed all the alien viruses and bacteria. He survived.

Waley knew that when first life crawled up out of the mudflats and tidal beaches of primitive planets, various forms of radiation had done their work. They produced the two basic necessities for life: the two molecules of protein and nucleic acid. Proved time after time in laboratory experiments from way back, the same stimuli produced the same molecules. And those molecules acted under the divine rhythm of the galaxy to produce life in abundance. With a yellow G-star, with a gravity near enough to Earth's one g, with a cyclic seasonal rate, a libration, a precession, an orbital swing in the same water-conferring-life golden regions around the sun, any planet would produce, eventually, men and women near enough like men and women anywhere else. On the question of sexual reproduction, Waley felt it most unlikely that he could ever father a child here. He was too young to feel regret at that.

His main worries would be attack by viruses or bacteria against which he had no natural antibodies, no artificial inoculations or vaccinations. He'd have to look into that as soon as he got around to more detailed conversations with these people. They called themselves the Homeless Ones, the Kerim, and he wondered why. This hut spoke eloquently of care, a love, a deep desire to fashion a permanent home. By the looks of the rest of the village, set in the cup of a valley, brimmed by mountains, vegetation bowered, these so-called Homeless Ones, the Kerim, had been here a long time.

One fear he could do nothing about as yet annoyed him with its frightening possibility. He might be studiously learning the Kerimatic language, only to discover that these

friendly people were a minor, unregarded sect of no importance, and he would have to start in again learning the language of the people who ran this country.

In addition—and he sweated blood over this one—he might be down on a normal Solterranean colonized world. Somewhere just over the hill might stand the town of the Earthmen: banks and shops, neat houses, libraries, churches, the cemetery, the airport and the transport terminal. He asked about this but could draw no understandable answers and eventually he decided that he must be down on a virgin world.

Virgin, that was, as far as Solterraneans were concerned.

A puzzling fact he soon noticed was the complete absence of children. In the dust of the village street no naked feet ran; no yellow cur dogs chased and were chased; no shrieking fights broke out; no little girls sucked their thumbs as little boys turned cartwheels. No kids.

When he took all the good points about the people and their village and lumped them together he reached a sizable pile of goodness; but that happy state existed hollow and mocked in the silent gloom of a childless noon. No kids.

He asked why and was met with frowns and a quick shrugging turn away, a furtiveness he found disagreeable.

Mimi's father, the bronzed bearded colossus with the dark brown voice, Drubal, looked to be almost indistinguishable from an Earthman. Looking at Mimi, one could tell at once that she had never been born on Earth. Something in the slant of her eyes, her ears, the way her breasts filled the saffron yellow gown, something in her walk, the wild alien freeness of it, something dredged deep in the subconscious of the race whispered that this girl was alien. Alien she might be, yes, but beautiful—as a star, as a first spring day, a budding rose—Jack Waley spent happy hours trying to think up suitably flowery epithets for her.

He didn't touch her, of course.

One day Drubal said gruffly: "You are strong and recovered of your wounds now, Jack. You will come hunting with me in the morning."

"Uh, yes," said Jack Waley in the Kerimatic speech. "Sure. Delighted."

The other people of the village had all uniformly been kind to Waley. He had come to know many of them by name and out of the three hundred or so souls he had so far never had a frown or scowl or an unkind word. Everyone had a job to do and seemed to get on with it with a quiet contained neatness very impressive to a young man fresh from the sprawling chaos and the driving impetus of the galaxy.

Jack Waley had been accepted into this self-contained community with a quietness he would have found disturbing had he been given to overmuch reflection. As it was he rolled out of bed next morning, donned the green sack-like garment that he had been given as his only clothing, and strapped on the soft doeskin sandals with the hard sole framed from an unfamiliar substance. He washed and, perforce, let his beard grow some more. Then, after a breakfast of fruit, eggs and milk, he was ready.

Drubal picked up his smooth-worn crossbow with the metal parts carefully oiled and wearing that deep inner luster that comes to old loved metal.

"That finish is a little different from the chrome I'm used to," Waley said, with a sigh. "Chrome that flakes off after a couple of months. What do I get to help in the hunt, Drubal? A spear?"

"You can use a crossbow, Jack; you have been shown how. So have a crossbow, by all means."

Waley thought again how casual, how off-hand, these people were for all their ingrained neatness. But then, they were alien. That should explain it all; but Waley was beginning to feel that alienness would not account for all the oddities he sensed around him.

Drubal seemed to be waiting for something.

Waley looked about. Four or five men were already setting off out of the village, walking with the long, loose-limbed determined stride of the professional hunter. All carried arbalests and some spears. The sun shone down cheerily with the promise of another fine summer day. Girls and women went about their household tasks. The busy life of the village, separately-directed yet collectively-operating, flowed on.

"I'm ready, Drubal," said Waley.

"Good."

Now what, Waley wondered with seething irritability, was old Drubal waiting for?

Then: "Your arbalest, Jack?"

"You know I don't have one. I was dragged in here with everything I possess on me. You've lent me this garment and these sandals. That's all I have. You know."

Drubal looked at him curiously, as one does at a boy who claims he does not have a penknife.

A flash of thunder shadowed Drubal's bearded face; then it cleared like a summer storm and he said: "Forgive me, Jack. It does not come easily to some. Some, I have heard, do it without speaking aloud; although that to me smacks of a folk tale. Here, if you will allow, let me."

Jack Waley took a breath. "Sure," he said. "Thanks."

He had no idea what Drubal was talking about.

Drubal cast about him and selected two twigs and a handful of grass. He bent one twig and set it across the other to form, as Waley saw with interest, the rough shape of a crossbow. The slivers of grass he placed beside this analogue. He stepped back a pace and composed himself, holding his hands, palms together, fingers pointing downward and thumbs outward. His beard lifted, bristling against the sky.

"Talk about Moses!" Waley thought irreverently.

Slowly, speaking with intense concentration so that a sweat drop formed at each corner of his forehead and slid shining down to his eyebrows, Drubal intoned: "A crossbow, oh Pe'Ichen! A crossbow, good and true, well-oiled and made with the cunning craft of thy hands, shining, balanced, sweetly trim. And with this wonder of thy making, oh Pe'Ichen, bolts, quarrels trued with only thy skill to fly straight and unerring. This, I ask of thee, oh great Pe'Ichen, this only, at this time, for thine is the everlasting glory of oneness. For thou, Oh puissant Pe'Ichen, are the one and only everlasting One."

Waley stared dumbfounded at Drubal. He stood very still. He was young; but he wasn't stupid enough to make a single silly move when an alien culture started in on religious rites. A curved sacrificial knife was trite recompense

for tomfoolery of that order. Little green or yellow eyes of little green or yellow gods had a tale to tell out in the galaxy—right up to the here and now. Drubal brought his hands slowly to his forehead. With a brisk rounding-up movement, he snapped his head down, swung his hands down, pointing, brusquely saying: "There you are, Jack. Now let's be off. The others have already started and we'll have to push on farther than they now."

"Uh?" said Waley.

"Oh, it's not your fault, Jack—don't misunderstand me. I should have provided the arbalest sooner, that's all."

Waley followed the pointing finger. He jumped back as though a diamondback had materialized at his feet.

Lying in the dust of the village street, where a moment before had been two crossed twigs and a handful of grass, was now a shining, brand-new, oiled and gleaming cross-bow, with a quiver of wicked-looking bolts beside it.

"What the—!" said Jack Waley. He swallowed, tasting dust. "Whoever put those there moved mighty quietly."

"Quiet and purposeful are the ways of Pe'Ichen, indeed," said Drubal with a hint of that intoning voice. "Come on, Jack. Pick them up."

"Yes, of course." Waley grasped the stock of the cross-bow and in the warmth of the dust felt the icy chill of the wood and metal bite stingingly into his fingers.

"It's cold!" he said, surprised.

"Always, lad. Now let us go, for the sake of a sweet-hipped woman of Kraboyne!"

That was a full-bellied oath to a man of Kerim, Waley knew, and felt ashamed he had punctured the dignity of Drubal's poise with his ignorance. Still and all—that cross-bow hadn't been there when Drubal had begun his prayer, and it was when he finished. He'd asked this god Pe'Ichen for a crossbow. And one had appeared. No one else had ghosted up with it, that Waley would swear.

"So—?"

So nothing. He had not enough facts to form any wild hypotheses yet. Just let old Drubal do that trick again—then poor old Jack Waley would keep his eyes open. . . .

They marched into the forest at first following worn

tracks that showed hard in the summer dust, then striking deeper into the wild green coolness, hearing the incessant murmur of life about them. Waley was a suburbanite. He would have been afraid of forests had he not had the pleasure of a spell of agricultural work on Lazenby III at the expense of the government. His number had been stenciled on his denims so they wouldn't mislay him.

Waley was a suburbanite to whom meat came in cans and frozen boneless plastic packs and in minced and shapeless heaps of near-tasteless pab; he should have been afraid to see bloodshed had he not many times witnessed one man take after another with a cleaver, or an axe, or any of a hundred other lethal weapons and finish the job long before the warders galloped up with their stun guns to part the living and the dead.

For a young man poor Jack Waley had picked up a lot of seamy-side knowledge of no use whatsoever aboard a spaceship or in the suburbs of a mechanical planet-wide city. Thought of that nature brought back with a video-clear shock the picture of the chief engineer chasing him with the wrench.

He felt a pang for the passengers and crew of *Bucen-taure*.

Poor devils, where were they now? Scattered as primeval atoms over a few parsecs of space, drifting as dead dust between the stars. And he, Jack Waley, strode through an enchanted forest with a magical crossbow over his shoulder, out hunting in a dress of green, living the clear pure life as it was meant to be led. So Jack Waley told himself, trying to live with what had happened to him.

"Remember," Drubal said with solemnity totally fitting here in the green gloom, "as soon as you have loosed, reload your arbalest. *At once*, mind. Nothing else first. Reload."

"But suppose," said smart Jack Waley, "the quarry is running away and you lose sight of him?"

"So you rush after him and you see him and then what, Jack? Loose at him with an empty arbalest?"

"Um. I see, Drubal."

"Good. I, too, see that you must be trained up in this work. We have not inquired into your antecedents and this

we shall not do. It is not our custom and, anyway, it doesn't make much difference, does it?"

"Doesn't it?" said Waley cautiously.

"Stranger you are and strange you are," Drubal said, parting the screen of leaves bordering the trail. He looked through. His body stiffened and then relaxed into limp alertness.

"I'm sorry that—" Waley began.

A hand shook. "Quiet!"

Waley stopped being sorry that.

Carefully, a leaf at a time, Drubal pushed ahead. Following his lead Waley kept pace. He hoped he was not making too much noise. Drubal evidently passed him in some mental academy of stalking for he continued to press on without further comment.

Waley began to think he was turning into a Great White Hunter and began to have cosy dreams of himself striking heroic poses over the kill—then he saw the quarry.

His first coherent thought was to run away as fast and, as far as his failing legs would carry him.

The thing was probably the Kerim equivalent to a hog. In size it matched a bull elephant. Those hairs were probably high-tensile wire. The tusks, Waley felt sure, must be molybdenum-chrome steel. The hooves looked as though they had been lovingly honed for the loving evisceration of unlovely men. The hide could only be high-grade armor. And it stank.

Drubal lifted his crossbow.

Waley looked at his own weapon. The six inch bolts, steel-tipped, slick and shining—why, they couldn't expect to fire those against that! The quarrels would probably bounce. If they stuck in at all they'd hold on by the tiniest tip, gradually drooping to fall out. The best they could hope for was that the elephant hog wouldn't notice something had tickled him.

A suppressed excitement animated Drubal. His teeth gnashed. His beard bristled. His eyes rolled. His whole body thrummed with enormous excitement.

The only excitement around here Jack Waley could see would be enjoyed by the hog when it tusk-chased, hoove-

degutted and fang-rended the two puny mortals who hadn't the sense to run for it.

Around them the green wood breathed deeply with the pulse of hidden life. Insects chirped cheerily. A bird flew down and looked at them critically. Everything was as it had been moments before—except that Drubal's horny hand reached for the last screen of leaves between them and the devil-god grunting hoggishly in the clearing.

Out in the clearing a ring of tiny emerald birds fluttered and caracoled around the elephant-hog, darting in to pick crumbs of food from between his monolithic legs, flying to dart in and peck at a fold of flesh between massive thighs, perching on his head and darting their heads down, relishing the fare between those wire-bristle hairs. Darting. "Drubal's bolts will do as much damage as those emerald birds," dismal Jack Waley groaned to himself.

Between them and the man-eater the clearing showed a patch of darker brown, overlaid with grass growing in a haphazard whirligig of brighter colors. The beast lifted a leg and thumped it down in a cloud of dust and glittering green birds. Waley jumped and a fresh tidal wave of sweat broke over his eyebrows.

"Keep still, Jack—" Drubal breathed the words like a long-term convict. "These droggas charge at the slightest sign of man."

Drubal parted the final screen of leaves and stepped into the clearing.

The drogga aimed an eye. Bloodshot and evil, that eye lined up on Drubal. One massive hoof lifted and the edge caught the sun and shot a scythe of razor-edged fire into Waley's eyes.

The drogga emitted a steam-whistle of destruction that shredded leaves from nearby trees.

The drogga charged.

Up went Waley's heels. Head down he ran. . . . Through bushes he crashed; over fallen logs he bounded. . . . Fifty yards away he saw the sky cartwheel above him, brown trunks and branches passing like spectral arms against the sunlight over his head; his rear impacted in dust-creating havoc with stony ground; the liana looped cunningly about

his ankles, twisting and suspending him soles over shoulders fifteen feet up.

Poor Jack Waley. Hooked!

Upside down his bulging eyes saw massive clouds of dust rising like a volcano from the clearing. Half of the clearing appeared to his distorted vision to have disappeared. Drubal, with a calm nonchalance, walked delicately forward to the lip of the pit. Noises of quite magnificent hideousness vomited up.

"Get me down!" screamed suspended Jack Waley.

Drubal took no notice of him at all. Looking down into the dust-smoking pit the bearded hunter pondered.

Jack Waley turned and spun, helpless as a spider's prey wrapped in swinging silk. The liana, he felt sure, was cutting through his ankle bones. Soon he would fall to the ground and leave his foot still tied up in the liana. Then the fall would break his neck, anyway. . . .

"Get me down!" gibbered upside-down Jack Waley.

Any minute now the blood would burst his head open like an overripe fruit. . . .

Drubal waved a casual arm at him, began to saunter back.

"I told you," he said critically, leaning back to look up, "not to make a movement. Lucky for us the drogga charged me and not you."

"Unngl!" said Jack Waley. "Down! Get me down!"

"Bend your head," Drubal said casually, taking a knife from inside his gown and hurling it at Waley. Waley winced and writhed his head, the knife sliced through the liana and Waley's shoulders hit the ground with a crash that straightened his legs and snapped his arms out straight at right-angles, the hands opening flat with the shock.

By the time he had stopped the bells ringing in his head and climbed sorely to his feet, Drubal was once more inspecting his catch. The drogga had now patiently begun bashing its tusks against one wall in the hope of bringing enough earth down to form a ramp for escape.

"Intelligent beasts." Drubal nodded down genially.

"My back—" said bruised Jack Waley.

"Your own fault, my lad. You'll never make a Kerim hunter if you go on like that—"

"I'll learn," Waley said with spirit.

"I meant, you'd be killed and eaten before you had a chance to learn."

"I'd like to know how you knew there was a pit trap right there."

Drubal smiled. "That was luck and clear conscience. It's a Green Boys trap, of course."

"Green Boys?"

"Factionous little fellows. Never contradict them. They don't like it. They'll have heard the noise by now." Drubal sighed resignedly. "We'll have to share with them."

Waley rubbed his back some more and winced.

A crossbow bolt whickered from the forest and stuck quivering into a treebole by his head. He stared at it, feeling his stomach beginning to loosen again.

"Hold still. That'll be the Green Boys."

V

LITTLE FELLOWS they were indeed, miniature terrors with squat bodies and flat jolly faces that would have Pickwicked one into affectionate laughter if they hadn't shone with a pale-green leafy hue. Four feet high the Green Boys stood, sinewy, liana-muscle, bent of leg and tentacular of arm, clad in leaves and bark and wearing on their heads tall wickerwork helmets over two feet high in a pitiful attempt to increase their stature like grenadier-capped napoleons. They knew exactly what they were about.

"That's our drogga."

"It's your trap," Drubal said, watchful and wary.

"Our trap; our drogga. Is finish."

"Your trap—my drogga."

"Is finish."

"I put the drogga there. I will share half with you—"

"You may have a quarter."

"Half."

Standing idly by while a friend haggled and was done down was not in Waley's book. Now he stepped forward, chestily, spread his hands out. "Now see here, my friends." He put the old sucker-come-on honeyed sweetness into his voice. "That drogga didn't just go into that trap after a female drogga. . . . My good friend and comrade Dru—Yeeoow!"

Poor Jack Waley. He tried to sit up and Drubal's knee gnashed him in the chest and rammed his head down again. He had said "Yeeoow!" when Drubal had leaped on him, screaming an astonishing libretto.

"Wha—what's got into you, Dru—?"

Again Drubal flattened him. His bearded lips rustled against Waley's ear. "Never—ever—use a man's name in ear-shot of the Green Boys, the Whispering Wizards!" He put one gnarled hand into Waley's hair and assisted him to rise. Waley's scream clogged in his throat as his scalp lifted. "Just say," finished Drubal, all sweetness and light, smiling, "that man, or this man, or—"

"Or nothing! I'm never going to recover from this!"

Waley went across and sat on the ground and amused himself throwing stones at the drogga.

They bounced like table tennis balls from a rock face.

Drubal's moods matched the needs of the moment. For Jack Waley, that alone was a valuable lesson.

He wondered about that stern and uplifting religious fervor that had possessed Drubal as he called on his god Pe'Ichen. How compare it with this indifference to anything other than the aim of the moment that Drubal was exhibiting now? Without surprise Waley heard the argument finish up with an agreement to split the drogga fifty fifty. What the drogga had to say about that no one bothered to inquire.

"Fore and aft," Drubal was saying as Waley joined him. "I will bring men."

With an insufflation of agreement the leader of the Green Boys turned away. Drubal nodded at Waley and they began the walk back to the village where men, boys and

girls quickly made up a drogga-development party. Everyone appeared happy. Drogga meat, Waley gathered, was a delicacy. Privately, he had reservations.

Mimi had gone with the party and Waley had to force himself to excuse himself on account of his stiff back. He did feel beat-up. He sat in the shade of the hut. Now—how did it go?

He found a sliver of wood and carefully laid it on the ground. He'd admired Drubal's knife—the one he'd used to cut the liana. That knife had gone spinning off into the forest and Drubal hadn't bothered to search for it. Jack Waley thought he knew why.

"Oh, Pe'Ichen," he intoned, his hands together, palms touching, fingers down, thumbs out. "Oh, Pe'Ichen, grant me, I beseech thee, a knife. A fine sharp knife even as the knife thou madest for Drubal; a king of a knife that only thou, oh Pe'Ichen, can create."

He looked down.

The twin to Drubal's knife lay on the ground where a moment before had been a sliver of wood.

Jack Waley stood up slowly. He picked up the knife and felt the frosty coldness of it against his sweaty palm.

Then he stood on his head.

He chuckled. He laughed. He collapsed weakly against the hut wall and let his helpless hilarity take over.

Think what he could do with this gift!

A simulacrum—a prayer—and the coveted object lay within your grasp.

Magic.

He wiped his eyes and wondered at that dubious word.

Could it be magic? Would the knife disappear if hidden mirrors turned their backs on him?

He could not think of a way of testing that, short of blaspheming the name of Pe'Ichen, and he felt itchy unwilling to do that. Lord knew what might happen. The knife had lost its coldness now and fitted his hand with lethal comfort. Take things as they happened; that had always been his way and right now was no time to change the philosophy of a lifetime.

For a young man who in however limited a way had

lived in the ambience of an interstellar civilization the answers to problems would automatically be sought through the media of science and technology. For a man like Jack Waley magic could never assume the guise of a real force. He could talk about magic and in his higher brain centers even attempt an evaluation of it; but his innate sense of scientific rightness would never allow him to believe wholeheartedly in anything inexplicable by those same scientific processes.

Mimi walked up with a hip-swinging litheness, her hands and wrists red, her alien face calm and yet filled with the same inner radiance he remembered from the face of Diana Darkster. She smiled at him and he scrambled to his feet awkwardly.

"They are bringing our half of the drogga in now, Jack. This evening there will be a great feasting."

"You know I'm not one of you, Mimi—I'm not a native Kerim—"

"We don't talk about where people come from," she said softly, washing her hands and arms in the big bucket standing outside the door. "What you are now is all that matters."

"Well—tell me, then; why don't you ask Pe'Ichen for your food instead of hunting it?"

She laughed gently, the low melancholy laugh of the Homeless Ones. "What, and miss all the fun the men have hunting?"

It just didn't add up.

"You mean they like killing?"

She glanced up quickly, her black hair falling across her face so that for a moment she seemed to be watching him from hiding. "No, Jack. We do not enjoy the killing. To-day we left that to the Green Boys, only assuring ourselves they did not take more than their share. But the hunting—there is the thrill."

"That I can follow." Waley thought disgustedly of his last and devastating attempt at organizational hunting. The chief engineer and his murdering wrench were atomic motes scattered among the stars now. . . .

That brought up other thoughts. He looked at Mimi, in-

terestedly. She stood with her hands stretched up, white arms gleaming, smoothing her heavy dark hair. Her saffron gown tautened and swelled.

Waley found a dozen pebbles in the dust, quickly arranged them in a string, dropped a shred of grass. Then, abruptly conscious of her sidelong look, he shut his opened mouth. He felt a fool. She looked away, drew her hands through her hair one last time and sauntered off into the hut. Waley could hear her inside clashing pots and pans. She would hear him—and suddenly he didn't want her to overhear what he would say.

Silently, his hands held in the prescribed fashion, he mouthed the words. "Oh, Pe'Ichen, grant me now a necklace, fine and shining, rich with jewels, a necklace fit for the white neck of a queen, a necklace such as only thou, oh great and potent Pe'Ichen could create."

Obediently the stones changed. Waley watched this time. A fuzziness obscured the stones and the shred of grass. A chiaroscuro of color, a blurring of outlines, a mistiness, and then he was looking at a string of gems that would have fetched the queen's ransom of a whole planet in Bond Street.

Their coldness struck chill as he picked them up.

"Whe-eel!" said Jack Waley. Green avariciousness glared starkly from his face. "If I can get back to Earth with this!"

Some of the gems he had no name for, others he recognized as rubies and emeralds, diamonds, amethysts and bellachrontis, gemstones from far-flung planets of the galaxy. He ran the string through his fingers, taking the cold away, seeing the sparkles flashing prismatically in the warm evening air.

Mimi opened her mouth in delighted surprise.

"Jack!" She took them with slender fingers that touched Waley's hand and made him jump. "For me!"

"For no one else, my stellar poppy!"

The Terran words fitted well with the Kerimatic.

She lifted her arms and slipped the necklace over her head. The jewels kindled like a fire on her breast. "Thank you, Jack—they are lovely." She leaned forward gently, her soft lips pouting, and kissed him.

Waley's head spun.

Alien she was—yet she was made like Helen of Troy, like Cleopatra, like the girl next door back home.

Waley put his arms on her back and pulled her toward him and Drubal said outside: "Hullo there! Where is everyone?"

They both jumped and a flush prettily stained Mimi's cheeks. Waley felt coldness on his forehead and wiped away sweat. Avoiding each other, they went outside. Drubal cast down a massive parcel wrapped and entwined in glossy leaves and lianas. He grunted as the thing left his shoulder. Red drops spilled from a corner.

"There!" he said with deep satisfaction. "We took the left side!"

"Oh, father, how wonderful!" Mimi looked about, then snatched the knife from Waley's belt and rushed on the parcel. "But it is only right! You took the drogga so you are entitled to the best! And I can't remember how long it's been since I tasted roasted drogga heart!"

She began to cut away the wrappings.

Poor Jack Waley! He had prided himself on his rough tough acceptance of new ways of life; but he was still a suburban boy brought up on tinned meat. Any heart for dinner was too much for him. A heart as big as a truck wheel was far, far too much. . . .

He felt something rising in his throat.

"Excuse me!" he stuttered and, one hand to his mouth, vanished around the corner of the hut.

Oh, hard Jack Waley!

Oh, tough guy Jack Waley vomiting his heart out over a heart!

That night conflagrations of fires defied the darkness and the good rich fat bubbled in pots, and thick juicy steaks roasted mouth-wateringly; aromas of heaven and all the seven delights of the celestial kitchens wafted to the stars. Men and women of the Kerim forgot for a fleeting moment that they were the Homeless Ones and settled down with flashing tooth and distended cheeks to enjoy themselves, the fat shining on their chins.

Boys discarded all but their loincloths and pranced and stamped and kicked the dust and shook their spears.

Girls clad in beads and feathers shimmied and swirled and sang and clapped their hands, and on slim ankles cunning golden bells tinkled in a beat to fire the blood.

And Jack Waley sat in the shadows of the hut where the red reflected fire glow could not reach him and chewed blindly on his meat and thought of Mimi and Maisie d'Angelo and Diana Darkster and all the others and tried—oh, how he tried!—not to think of the drogga—part of which he now ate.

The mystery of the Kerim meant nothing to him now. They were aliens and he had always liked aliens and got on with them and had felt more guilt about chicanery with an alien than with a Terran. So that element had no power to distress him. Mimi was a lush girl and he wanted her. She had no mother to guide her; but Waley knew with a long-headed caution that Drubal would look out for his daughter with more than twice the zeal of a husband with a wife to care for the children. His head nodded. He had had a big day. His ankle still hurt. So did his back. He slumped down, the rich meat dropping from his hand.

A supple figure moved with dancing grace into the shadows of the hut; beads and golden bells chimed in delicate song; feathers rustled a soft invitation.

Slender limbs caught the fireglow and white flesh reddened warmly. No saffron gown now concealed what lay beneath. Her eyes dark with deep mysteries, her ripe mouth open and pouting, all her body alive and vibrant with youthful love, Mimi danced there before Jack Waley.

But Jack Waley's head dropped on his breast and from his half-open mouth a snore struggled free like stew boiling in a pot.

Another figure joined Mimi. Lithe and quick-limbed; strong; loincloth tight beneath flat stomach and mightily molded ribcage. Young manly muscles bulged.

A laugh, a giggle. The touch of hands. The two dancing figures vanished together, side by side, close.

And Jack Waley—poor robbed Jack Waley—slept on.

VI

"BUT I THOUGHT Pe'Ichen was your god. . . ."

"That's as near blasphemy as makes no difference, boy! Guard your tongue."

Jack Waley gulped and scrubbed more vigorously at Mimi's cooking pot. In the morning light the ring of dead ashes held a somber note, a ring of dead desires.

"I am fascinated by religion," Waley lied. "But I make a point never to discuss it with strangers. Are we then strangers, Drubal?"

Drubal wiped an oiled cloth over his crossbow for the last loving time. "No, Jack," he said with heavy consideration. "Not strangers. We ask no questions—"

"You got me from the wreck of the lifeboat—"

"This I do not understand. You were found near a heap of metal and strange devices—"

"Why then won't you guide me back there? If no religious taboos are involved—"

"When the time is ripe you will learn of our god. As to this heap of broken rubbish you call a lifeboat, why, Pe'Ichen has taken that up to himself."

"You mean it's gone?"

"Of course. Nothing is left to rust to waste."

"I see." He didn't; but there seemed no percentage in sidetracking Drubal.

Waley's head ached even though he had taken no intoxicants the night previously. Mimi had not yet appeared from her curtained portion of the hut. He figured he'd have to work another gift—say a bracelet or two—and then begin again. He had realized, first thing this morning, that he had asked Pe'Ichen to create the necklace without saying the words aloud; he kept that item of information as an ace up his sleeve.

"Pe'Ichen gives and Pe'Ichen takes. This is the immutable law of the land."

"Forgive me—but—do you know who Pe'Ichen is? I mean," Waley rushed on at Drubal's bearded expression, "I know nothing and I need help. Would you deny me that?"

Drubal placed the crossboy gently on a leaf and began checking his quarrels. Without looking at Waley, he said: "Pe'Ichen is of the long ago. He gives what we ask for, if we obey his rules. Some things he will not give. He will not give us any living thing, nor some things that are now dead but have once been alive."

"*No dancing girls!*" cheated Jack Waley said to himself forlornly.

"And no one," he said as calmly as he could, "knows how Pe'Ichen does these wonders?"

"What wonders could they be, then, Jack?"

"What wonders! Why—just saying a prayer for something you want and having it plunked down right in front of your eyes. Isn't that a wonder?"

Drubal looked honestly puzzled. "No, Jack. It's the way it's always been."

"I give up."

"The old men, the wise ones, once told me that there lived a man in a triangular silver spire who knew more about Pe'Ichen than anyone else living. He could ask Pe'Ichen for wonders beyond our comprehension and receive them. He was, they said, a strange and moody man."

"That sounds interesting. Where did he live—did the wise ones know?"

"No. In a place of black boulders and silver feathers, of gargantuan thunders and a never-dying mist—but beyond that they could not learn."

The painted curtains shielding Mimi's part of the hut undulated and a white hand and a slender arm reached through. Waley stood up.

"They didn't know this man's name, Drubal?"

"Names are precious things, Jack. Each is a crystal of light and meaning, given as a blessed birthright to every individual man and woman and—" He paused and held himself rigid for a moment in a pose that betrayed a great

weariness and life-hunger. "Never mind our sorrow for now, for it is always with us and there are many times to think of it when we must. No, Jack, this man had no name to distinguish him from us all, save that—" He hesitated.

"Yes?"

"I am sorry," Drubal went on with apparent divergence from Waley's pressing inquiry, "that I threw you down so roughly. But you were about to speak my name to the Green Boys, the Whispering Wizards. And, even though Drubal is not my real name but only the cover name given to me after my own name was spoken once at my initiation, the Whispering Wizards have power to use even that."

"You were going to tell me something about this man in the silver spire. Forget about knocking me down. I'm used to that."

Mimi had drawn back the curtain now but remained invisible in the shadows.

"The wise ones used to call him the Guardian, a name bandied about but obviously not his own. Who he was and what he guarded no one can guess."

"Perhaps he guarded Pe'Ichen?"

Drubal laughed, a full hearty bellow of rough contempt. "Speak your nonsense somewhere else, lad. Mere mortals to guard Pe'Ichen! Of what need has Pe'Ichen of mortal attendance?"

Jack Waley nodded and moved back, not looking at the darkness within which Mimi would be combing her hair before stepping out into the sunshine. She had slept late this morning and Drubal had not seemed to mind. Waley wanted to get off into the forest and yet Drubal's rambling reminiscences held him. Now Drubal gathered up his quarrels.

"That follows, Drubal. If you'll excuse me, I have a little task I must do."

He sauntered off, not too fast, but quickly enough to take him past the end of the hut and on the trail toward the forest before Mimi could reach the sunlight.

He couldn't face her this morning without a little more careful thought.

Last night he had looked forward to seeing her with a tremulous eagerness that would have mocked him and made

him a laughing stock in his own estimation a few months before. He, Jack Waley, the gallant blade about the galaxy, shivering with excitement over an alien village lass! But he hadn't seen her and he'd awoken stiff and sore with the first light, sprawled out on the dirt.

And he hadn't had a single drink.

Now he trudged off into the forest with a mind seething with ideas.

He found a clearing where shining leaves hemmed him in and tree boles twined into the semblance of a fence.

Lucky Jack Waley!

By a cheap simulacrum and a brief formula he would summon wealth beyond avarice, conjure gold from lead, the substantial from the insubstantial; by an incantation incarnate in reality mold all the indolent dreams of childhood and freely furbish a philosopher's self-willed paradise of creation.

Oh, lucky, indeed, Jack Waley!

Stones, sticks, leaves, twigs, dust—all he gathered around him, trembling with passionate desire. In each humble object he saw as though limned by rose and purple clouds of glory the soon-to-be-true grandeur of the thing he desired.

This round pebble now—why, what else could it be but a radium-powered wristwatch, telling the times and dates on fifty different planets and the states of the tides where applicable? This twig a diamond stick-pin! Diamond? No—any one of a hundred precious jewels could be had for the mere thought—a bellachrontis stick-pin, then. . . . Cuff-links, sir? Surely—two dabs of earth and a wisp of grass. Jewels for my lady—garters, pendants, rings, necklaces, tiaras—how lovely Mimi would look in a tiara glittering into a smoky haze above that lustrous raven's-wing hair! A car? Four boulders and a felled tree-trunk; nothing less. Clothes? All the leaves of the forest clustered and sighed anxiously awaiting their obedient transformation into clothes of magnificence for a man of magnificence.

Supremely lucky Jack Waley!

He sat there with moisture in the corners of his eyes, staring in rhapsody at his sticks and stones, his leaves and twigs, and seeing in them all the riches of the galaxy.

First—before the delectable piling-up of fabulous wealth could decently begin—before he fulfilled the wishes of his heart's desire—first the stark business must be transacted. For Jack Waley—sweet-violet-smelling Jack Waley—had not lost sight of his position.

Quickly he pushed four twigs into a square, hurled down pebbles, arranged them artistically and as well as he remembered from casual glances when his thoughts had been parsecs away.

He pressed his palms together, fingers down, thumbs sternly indicative, and composed himself.

"Oh, great and mighty Pe'Ichen," he intoned soundlessly. "Pe'Ichen who can grant man's every wish, give me now an interstellar transceiver, full wave-band, super-modulated, transistorized, auto-grid located, super-powered, covered by a year's guarantee or money refunded."—That struck him as hilariously out of place but he let it go—"Oh Pe'Ichen, the One and Indivisible, grant me now an interstellar transceiver to speak to my own people."

With excruciating pleasure Waley stared at the rectangle of twigs and the pebbles within.

Was that the dimming haze? A silvery mist, the *chiaroscuro* of color, the *changing*?

His impatience hung fire. He stared, willing the transceiver to appear in all its gray crackle-finished chrome-plated glory.

The twigs and the stones stared blankly back.

"Come on!" he pleaded.

Sticks and stones.

"Sticks and stones can break my bones when Cinderella deserts me!" he groaned.

He tried again. He tried it all ways. He spoke the words aloud; he used gross flattery, he dropped onto his knees and begged. He constructed a three-dimensional box and positioned stones where he figured transistors and coils and chokes would be; flung down leaves as simulacra for printed circuits; tried and tried again and at last sank back on his heels, exhausted.

Oh miserable Jack Waley!

He stared sickly at the piles of forest debris that would

soon become the riches of planetary potentates. Of what use were they now? He was stuck down here. Stuck hard and fast on the reefs of an alien planet and he would never get off. . . . Never . . . *Never* . . . NEVER . . .

Surreptitiously he kicked the transceiver analogue.

The wood collapsed in a smother of leaves and stones and dusty twigs.

Well . . . He took a deep breath, hastily arranged a crop of stones and grass, thought with curt indifference: "Say, Pe'Ichen—iffen you can!—change this little lot into a fabulous tiara—and make it good!"

Obediently the stones and grass vanished to be replaced by ice cold gems sparkling with fire, fabulous in their magnificence, a tiara for an empress' coronation.

He picked up the glittering wonder, stuck it on his head, and danced wildly about, flinging his arms into the air, stamping with his feet, scattering the piles of previous gems, the magnificent jewelry, the clothes and all the sumptuous offering that, true enough, were as yet still merely sticks and stones and leaves.

"Poor old Jack Waley!" he sobbed to himself, and then, maudlin drunk with exhausted disappointment, aloud and bitterly: "Poor old Jack!"

Movement in the green wood arrested him. His frozen antic halted on one outstretched toe and he grasped a branch for support. The bolt *thwunked* into the tree trunk on the hypotenuse of his arm and the branch.

Dust tasted flat on his tongue and he spat it out, hardly lifting his head from the ground, hugging dead leaves and all the bric-a-brac of unrealized fortune. He did not remember falling flat on his face. He remembered the quarrel striking the tree and the next instant the dust slicking stickily in his open mouth.

Quick moving Jack Waley . . .

A shaft of splintered wood beneath his hand reminded him. . . . "A spear, Pe'Ichen, and quick about it!" he thought viciously. The coldness of the spear-shaft chilled his fingers; but he grasped it angrily and half rose, glaring about for a squat Green Boy into which he could hurl his anger and disappointment and lust for vengeance.

The Green Boys were not dubbed that merely because their skin beat with a pulse of green. . . . In the green wood they stalked freely, unseen, silent and deadly.

Cautiously Waley wriggled about. Something pressed on his forehead and he let out a half-stifled yell and stabbed frantically upward with the spear. His lunge carried him up and into emptiness, the spear slipping from his fingers and clattering down. The tiara slid all the way down and rested rakishly on his nose.

"Damn!" he said, jerking the thing off and going to hurl it from him. Then he changed his mind, snatched up a leaf, held it against his green sack-garment at waist level and thought: "A pocket, curse you, Pe'Ichen, a pocket to stick this thing in!"

He shoved the tiara into the pocket and slithered forward to retrieve the spear.

Then, knowing the Green Boys had gone, he thought about a crossbow; cursed when nothing happened; savagely wrenched twigs into an analogue, and thought again; and then rose to one knee, clutching the arbalest and hoping to find a target.

Oh, malefic Jack Waley!

When he slouched back into the village trailing the spear, his face twisted with the effort of nonchalance, he recognized with deep gut-wrenching pain what a bungler he was. But, at the very least, Jack Waley would keep up a cocky front to the world—alien or what-have-you—and never let his own discomfiture disfigure his own image of the figure he cut.

Mimi ducked out of the hut, carrying a pudding basin, saw him, and burst out laughing.

Something deep stirred in Waley then as he stared sullenly at her, seeing the white column of throat rounded with bubbling laughter. Her face swam before him. He dropped the arbalest, dragged the pudding basin from her hands and pushed her into the hut.

Her laughter stopped and her eyelids slid half-down.

"Jack? Jack—what's the matter?"

The spear clattered into the dust. He hauled out the

tiara and reached up, placed it carefully on that crown of lustrous hair.

"There, my superlight lily! You look fabulous!"

She peeked into a spotty mirror hanging on the wall.

"It's lovely, Jack." She preened. "You do manage to get Pe'Ichen to make beautiful jewelry."

No secrets on this planet, then.

"I'm glad you like it, my little stellar flower. Where's Drubal?" The last artlessly.

"Gone into the forest. He won't be back for hours.

"Good old Drubal," Waley said; but softly.

Waley had one imperative need now. He recognized it and he recognized why it had swept over him so strongly just now. If previously guilts and fears of parentage had dissuaded him, now that aspect could be left to inimical biology of alien planets.

He put one hand to her cheek—soft, soft!—and looked into her face. Her lips trembled.

"I missed you last night, Mimi. I was very sorry."

She looked down at the floor.

"I danced for you last night, Jack. But you—you were asleep."

He felt her reproach warm and inviting upon him.

"I had had a big day—but—will you dance for me now?"

"Oh—I couldn't! I mean—not like this. . . . There has been no preparation. . . ."

"I think," Jack Waley said a little unsteadily, "some preparation can be dispensed with and some others—altered?" The clasps of her saffron robe unsnapped with charming alacrity. The bodice fell sighing and rustling.

"Yes," Waley said, drawing a deep breath and swaying forward. "Yes, my perfect little darling, you're just like the girls back home—only better. . . ."

His hands rested trembling on her shoulders; her face was upturned to his with an openness and an innocent waiting that twisted a fiber of deeper longing in him; he moved closer, his hands dropping down. . . .

"Jack," a ghostly voice whispered in his ears. "Jack, we want you. Come to us, Jack. Leave all you hold dear, Jack,

and come to us. For we have such need of you, Jack. . . . Come, Jack. . . . Come. . . ."

He straightened up as though flicked by ten gees in the small of his back

His arms flew out, away from white shining loveliness, snapped to his sides.

His face leered and then rubbered into a flat blank stare.

The whispering voice rustled evilly against his ears.

"That's a good boy, Jack. Come on! Walk to us! Walk away from everything you own, Jack. . . . Come to us. . . . We need you so. . . . Come on, Jack. . . . Jack, come to us. . . ."

"Jack!" screamed Mimi. She flung herself on him, wrapping her white arms about his ironing-board body, straining herself to him, her saffron gown trailing down around her waist.

Stolidly he turned, arms at sides, legs pumping with mechanical stiffness. He dragged Mimi off the ground and she swung around with him. He began to stalk toward the door. Mimi's gown caught beneath his feet, ripped, was dragged down and, in a wildly despairing wail, Mimi, too, fell away from him.

"Jack!" she screamed. She lay on the floor, one hand to her breast, the other supporting her body, her flesh white and rosy, her legs sprawling limply. "Jack! Stop him, somebody! Stop him!"

But Jack Waley walked blindly from the hut; like a programmed robot he humped across the dust of the village, heading for the green wood.

Men and women came running, to halt and stand and stare and whisper. Mimi, the rags of her gown clutched to her, ran from her hut, tried despairingly to push past the line of onlookers, her hands an ineffectual flutter.

"Jack—!"

"There's nothing you can do, Mimi. . . . Nothing!"

"We can tie him up—"

"You know better than that! You condemn him to death by slow strangulation as he tries to work free of his bonds. Let him go. . . . Poor Jack Waley. . . ."

"Jack!"

"Come to us, Jack. . . . For we need you so sorely. . . . Leave your friends and leave your home, for we are your new friends and your new home. . . . Come, Jack. . . . Come to us. . . . Faster, Jack. . . . Come, Jack, come. . . ."

"Come back, Jack!"

"Leave him, Mimi! You can do nothing!"

"Let him go, Mimi. . . . The Whispering Wizards have him in their power and nothing you can do will bring him back. . . ."

"The Whispering Wizards. . . ."

"The Green Boys. . . ."

"Oh, my Jack. . . . Gone. . . . Gone forever!"

"Keep walking to us, Jack. . . . Faster, for we need you with us so sorely. . . . Come to us, Jack."

"Jack!"

Poor Jack Waley.

VII

A STEAK with mashed potatoes and garden peas . . .

A brand-new white shirt fresh from its polythene wrapper . . .

The first whisky of the evening . . .

A girl's violet eyes dilating with suddenly understood pleasure . . .

All of the senses, beckoned the Whispering Wizards; nothing of the spirit.

"Rest you there, Jack, and take your ease. . . ."

Jack Waley's staring eyes blinked and opened and he saw.

"Mimi—" he started to say. And stopped. And closed his mouth. And did not believe what his eyes saw and his hands and back and feet felt.

The cage had been cunningly designed. Slotted bars gave an adjustment as to height and width and breadth. Those measurements had now been tailored to fit around Waley's crouching, bent over figure. He could not stand upright;

he could not sit down; he could only crouch with rounded back and feel the running pains artfully begin to torture his muscles. Every now and then he would jerk spasmodically as a muscle rebelled and his head would crack up against the topmost wooden bars.

The discomfort of his position at last forced him to believe that what his senses told him was true.

Yet—yet he had been in the hut with Mimi—warm and soft and yielding Mimi—so what had happened? He did not believe Drubal would be so extreme.

A small yet menacingly powerful figure moved into sight and Jack Waley understood. The Green Boy stood laughing at the prisoner. Waley ducked his head down and like a motor mechanic contorting himself to reach a designed-in-inaccessible repair point, twisted himself around to stare out of the cage. A ring of the Green Boys, some twenty or so, was breaking up, the little aliens rising and stretching, yawning, talking gleefully. In the center of the ring a stuffed straw dummy with a fair likeness to Waley sagged from a post stuck upright in the ground.

They'd heard his name as he'd shouted out in frustrated anger in the forest and they'd gone home and fabricated their damned straw image of him and then they'd chanted their mind-paralyzing whispers and drawn him here.

Jack Waley—sucked along by a whisper like a snotty-nosed kid at the end of a pair of reins. . . .

It was humiliating.

The Green Boy stuck a long stick in through the wooden bars and poked Waley in the ribs.

His green gown had been taken from him and he crouched now naked. The stick punched between two ribs and he yelled.

"Hey! What the Narboshnik Caves are you playing at?"

That was an expression a man of the village had once used when his wife had accidentally dropped his dinner in the fire, and Mimi had flushed painfully.

Now the Green Boy said flatly: "You are awake. Good. Just behave yourself and all will be well—Jack."

"Get lost," said Jack Waley.

They brought him an earthenware bowl sloshing with

thin gruel and tossed a well-chewed crust into him. . . . His hands were not tied, but by this time he had crouched and prostrated and impotently bowed all night and could not have used a muscle to walk, let alone run. The Green Boys came for him with the sun and loaded him like a sack between two small spotted animals that smelled of old goat. He hung like a ball on a pole, wrists and ankles dangling.

A small party set off through the green wood and balled-up Jack Waley went with them.

Trying not to think came hard to Waley. An active volatile mind always turning and twisting gave him now no aptitude to endure mindlessly. The lurching progress through the forest stretched endlessly and his agony spiraled from blue-black points of pain to red fires of immortal agony and perdition. Chastening. Oh, very chastening for poor Jack Waley.

Toward midday they halted, while the Green Boys had a fine feasting, cooking joints of meat over a crackling fire and lapping great flagons of thirst-quencher. For Waley they condescended a bowl of thin gruel and another well-gnawed crust. He had drunk the gruel and swallowed most of the crust before he had time to think.

"Dog-rot you for a bunch of pasty green whipper-snappers!" he mumbled out between the last of the crust.

He was naked. He was not bound. The bars of the cage in which he was balled up had been stripped of bark. They shone smooth and unpickable. Not a shred of rope could be nail-levered free. Nothing existed in the cage apart from him.

Even had he been able to break free—and he felt confidently that he could break out whenever he wanted to, after the meal had made him rethink—his knotted muscles would refuse point-blank to do anything his brain told them to do until they had had a long blissful untangling and straightening. They'd barred and balled him up and, like a hog for slaughter, breaking out would not solve his problem.

He saw with lackluster eyes more of the Green Boys, moving with their sinister jog-trot quite unlike a real man's open stride, come prancing and jiggling up to his captors.

With them were four more bundled, parceled, barred and balled human captives.

As the expanded procession jogged along secret forest trails Waley could not help but inspect his new companions in misfortune, although he felt no interest in them and no concern for them. His mind endlessly revolved the single pressing problem of how to unravel his muscles fast.

Two of the prisoners were young men, naked and browned and strong, their long dark hair tangling in the bars of their cages, their sinewy legs twisted awkwardly, their faces blank and downcast and defeated.

The third man was older, in the prime of middle-life, shocked with stubbled black hair, scars shining like white tusks over his body, muscle-ribbed, his face a square hating block of vicious anger. Of him, Waley thought, if the push ever came, much could be expected. He continually moved his body, tensing first one set of muscles, and then another, moving his arms and legs in flexion and iron-bar tautness. Experimentally, Waley began to do the same, gasping as pain clawed up from twisted muscles. But he saw the tough man's idea, and he persevered, forcing his shrinking body to fight its own muscles like an advertisement.

The fourth prisoner was a girl, long dark hair concealing much of her white and bruised body, her position strangely unsettling in a woman, where in a man it was merely laughable. Waley could not see her face. As the procession rounded curves in the trail and the goat-like polka-dotted animals swayed together, he could hear her low continuous moaning—a sobbing keening very distressful.

This crouching position for a man, Waley decided, was merely undignified; for a woman it became a cruel blasphemy against all womanhood.

In muscle-writhings and blood-poundings, in bruises and scratches, in swayings and bumpings, the day rolled on for Jack Waley and the other four prisoners. Toward nightfall the Green Boys halted beside a low sway-backed hut of reeds and set about preparing camp. Waley humped himself around, losing a few discarded square inches of flesh against the bars, so he could look across at the woman. All he could see was the square barred outline of her cage and

a contorted white shape beyond, streaked and shielded by long black hair. He strained his eyes against the fading glow to penetrate more clearly, but the outlines blurred and shadows gathered like bats beneath the eaves and darkness fell.

Could it be?

He hoped with a fierce and renunciatory passion that it could not be.

With the darkness lamps began to pepper the shadows with fireballs that curled up the edges of blackness. A disturbance down the back trail resolved into more polka-dotted old-goat pack animals with more caged and crouching human prisoners. The Green Boys talked and laughed a lot now and the sounds of drinking deepened and broadened. Waley perked up. Then his cage was roughly dragged up and pushed down again—on its side; the Green Boys didn't much care which way up their human cargos rested—to make room for the fresh arrivals and he was looking directly at the woman's cage from six inches away.

He daren't use her name, just in case.

"Can you hear me, my stellar poppy?"

No answer, no response, nothing.

"Let me see your face, oh sunflower of the south—"

The long dark hair swirled; the head moved laboriously; a seamed, lined, one-eyed, broken-toothed face leered out at him. A croaking voice said: "Why don't you shut your stupid great meat-hole and let a person get some sleep?"

"Ugwump!" said Jack Waley, sagging back, relieved, dismayed, shaken and vastly amused.

Now he had no responsibilities here at all.

He had two problems, one of which he could overcome by exercise and muscle-toning; the other, of which he had no way of gauging the effectiveness, would probably prove the more intractable. Drubal hadn't spoken much about the Whispering Wizards. Waley had too little information about them. The only thing he could do was break open the cage, try to get his limbs into running order and get away as far and as fast as he could.

Over just what range could the Whispering Wizards drag him back?

A movement in the cage at right angles to the witch—who was still slobbering and mumbling about rot-gutted slobs who snorted ding-batted stupidities in the middle of the night—caught Waley's attention. Didn't the old bag *know* what was happening? Or did she always sleep in a cage crouched up like a bent slipper?

In that second cage a man's body thrust hard at the bars and by smoke reflected light Waley saw two hands pressed hard together palm to palm, fingers down and thumbs out. A deep manly voice intoned: "Oh mighty Pe'Ichen, I abase myself before the throne of your majesty! Grant me, I beseech thee, thy base and unworthy servant, a knife—a good knife, oh Pe'Ichen, made as only thou can create a knife, as good as knife as thou wilt see fit to grant to me—"

Waley was thinking that Pe'Ichen must get a laugh out of the way some people asked him for favors; this man evidently believed in the humble approach. The strong voice went on, pleading for the knife.

The inevitable happened. A green flash among the auras of the lamps, a thumping smash of a stick, a sharp yelp of pain, a groan. No knife tinkled.

"Keep your mouth shut, Krotch. Pe'Ichen has no favors to grant you."

"You runt-sized, pea-green, refuse-bodied, steaming lumps of human offal!" The deep voice roared in anger across the night. "I'll castigate the last sewer-mother's son of you!"

A blow and another full-bellied oath, the words of which were lost on Waley as he realized the full significance of this man Krotch's escape attempt, quickly followed. But if Krotch, evidently a man of resource who knew his way about, a man of this alien world, was trying to escape, that must surely mean that escape was feasible. Waley's thoughts jangled. Perhaps, he tried not to think too boastfully, just perhaps it would be lucky Jack Waley once more.

Just how detailed a simulacrum was required Waley didn't know. He reached up, gritted his teeth and yanked a hair out of his head. His beard had still no full length and, anyway, would be more tender. He started biting the

hair down its length, trying to give a rough idea of serrations.

"Quick, Pe'Ichen," he said beneath his breath. "Hurry up and give me a saw suitable to cut through this wood—not too big teeth now. I don't want to make too much noise."

The saw—ice cold, as always—appeared. He looked at the teeth. They should do nicely. He started in on the bar nearest him, working most awkwardly in his cramped position. Wood and rope parted beneath those steadily gnawing teeth. He worked carefully, pausing often, listening in the pauses. Inside half an hour he had cut away all but the last lashing on one side and this corner remained distant and frustratingly aloof beneath his buttock. He just couldn't reach it. He tried shimmying around and lost more skin. If he pushed the side up and out against the lashed corner there would be noise. He doubted if he was as yet fit enough to run into the shadows before the Green Boys arrived. No—he had to get clear away before they knew he had gone. Even then, he had no idea of how far he must go before their devilish Whispering Wizardry would call him back.

He sagged back, panting, and looked up straight into the one eye of the crone. She opened cracked lips displaying snagged and isolated teeth.

"I dunno how you did it, you slob, but give me the saw and I'll cut that last lashing for you."

Waley was aware that Krotch, too, was watching him with the open-mouthed stare of a desert-thirsty man eying a full glass of juice.

"All right. Here." He pushed the saw across the six inch gap.

"Tee hee," said the crone in best cronish glee and fell at once to cutting her own lashing.

"Here!" said Waley, sharply. "You said you'd cut my last rope!"

"All in good time, boy; all in good time. And keep your stinking voice down a peg or two; we don't want those pea-green lolly-boys gagging around here. . . ."

The injustice of it! Waley fumed. Then he pulled another

hair out of his head, chomped it up and told Pe'Ichen to jump to it.

Krotch said softly: "I don't believe that, stranger."

The white scars on his body shone oilily in the light. His muscles bulged as he moved in sympathetic union with Waley's movements to get at that last perverted lashing.

"If you make too much noise you'll be done for," Krotch rumbled low. "Those sickly-green lumps of sewer-filth won't stand for two escape bids in one night."

Waley said: "Listen to me, you one-eyed, toothless-gobbed apology for a woman! Hand this saw to Krotch over there! No tricks, or when I'm out of here I'll pull out every last one of your dyed hairs."

She started a wail at that but quickly turned it into a general wail of defeat. She took the saw and handed it across to Krotch. Soon there were three of them, all contorting and sawing and pausing and listening.

With a loud snap that quivered their nerves, the last rope snapped on Krotch's cage. He let down the barred side and rolled out. He stood up in under five minutes and then rolled across on squat legs to Waley's cage.

"Here, friend; let me." With half a dozen lashing strokes Waley was free. All he could do was roll out onto the ground and try to starfish his body that insisted on jackknifing into a rigor-mortis of fetal constriction.

"I'll be—all right—in a jiffy—" he said, feeling molten lava embedded in pinpricks and white-hot knives coursing through his body, the old throb and bang of blood investigating long unused arteries. "This is murder!"

"Shut your salivating meat-hole!" said the witch nastily. "If either of you two was a friend you'd help me out."

"You—watch out for—your dyed hair," Waley gasped out, rolling about and kicking with the needles jabbing him.

Krotch got her out and lifted her up. Waley could have sworn her spindly arms and legs snapped as Krotch straightened them out. Krotch had one palm clasped over the crone's mouth.

"We'll have to take her with us. She'll yell pink predaking murder if we don't."

"Yes," said Waley, trying to stand up on legs that didn't yet belong to him.

"Come on, friend." Krotch picked him up with his free arm and then moved silently off into the green wood. Waley hung like a sack of meal, electric pringlings jerking his arms and legs and the top of his head fandangoing like the lid of a boiling saucepan.

He had to ask the question. "How far?" he said through chattering teeth. "How far away do we have to go before the Whispering Wizards can call us back?"

Krotch laughed, an ugly amused bellow of sound.

"You are a green one—no offense meant, of course."

"Why?"

"I was foolish enough to let the Green Boys hear my name when I was trying to pass a little of the old pastime in the forest—she would insist on talking—and so they took me. But their magic works only once. Why else do you think they kept us in those imps-of-hell torturing cages for?"

"Oh!" said Jack Waley, feeling relief all mixed up and jangling with the pins and needles.

No doubt existed in Waley's mind that Krotch knew his way about in the green wood. As the blood flowed more strongly so Krotch's rhythm stepped up; his bowed legs padded near-soundlessly; his surefootedness took them safely over obstacles, dead-falls, patches of swamp, trailing lianas. Waley's eyes closed. He might have drifted off to sleep if he hadn't heard the loud throaty snore from the old crone well away in Krotch's other arm.

Was he, Jack Waley, a young blade about the galaxy, to sleep like an old witch-woman and let an alien carry him through the dangerous and inhuman-horror infested jungle? He thought about that for a bit and decided, conditions being what they were, that he would. Besides, his feet hurt.

There seemed to be no stopping Krotch. Once he had settled down to his stride he padded on and on. The rhythm lulled Waley again. He told himself sternly that as the brains of this outfit he should stay awake and alert. But his head hung down and his eyelids stung and he closed them, to ease them, of course, and . . .

"You can both wake up now," Krotch's deep bass voice boomed cheerily.

"Eh, whazzat?" mumbled Waley, floundering like a hooked mackerel. "Who's asleep? Oh, the old witch—"

A cracked voice snarled back at him: "You was out to the wide wide, sonny, flat on your back and your gob gaping like a fledgling still wet from the egg."

"I was thinking," Waley said frigidly. He started to climb to his feet and fell over at once.

"Just take it easy, me old lapsoloozer," said Krotch in a friendly voice. "I've caught some fish and have a nice little fire spitting away. Have a drink."

Waley showed no surprise at the silver goblet chased with vigorous hunting scenes handed to him. Pe'Ichen would provide, even for hunted fugitives in the green wood.

"Water!" he said, drinking. "Couldn't you ask Pe'Ichen for something a little stronger?"

Krotch rocked back. Then he stared more closely at Waley. They sat in a little clearing above the bank of a pleasant stream with the rays of sunshine slanting in early-morning joy and filling the leaves with light.

"You are a strange one," Krotch said slowly. "You summon on Pe'Ichen without words—a trick I've heard spoken of outside the nobility but never believed before—and yet you ask daft questions." He turned silvery fish over before him. "No man asks Pe'Ichen for food or drink unless he wishes to be refused in thunder and lightning. Only one in the last extreme can hope to have granted the boon of bodily sustenance."

It fitted, Waley supposed gloomily, visions of steak and bottles of whisky, great red cheeses as big as his head fading. It was all of a piece with the unavailable dancing girls.

Because he could please himself he chose a fawn shirt and slacks and felt quite irrational pleasure when recognizably well-cut garments appeared, cold and rapidly thawing. Krotch attired himself in a shaggy garment that turned him into a bulky bear, leather belted and bronze buckled, with a swathing great sword hanging at his side. They both turned, chuckling as the old crone raised her voice in a snarling whine.

"Thank you, oh great Pe'Ichen," she was gnashing out, her rubbery mouth writhing around her sentinel teeth. "The bellachrontis is beautiful but a little, oh great Pe'Ichen, I dare to ask, a little too large. It will not fit easily."

They both gaped at her. She had clad herself in golden breastplates, a wealth of jeweled rustling skirt, anklebells, all the veiled allurements of the professional dancer. Her abdomen gleamed whitely. The bellachrontis, evidently, would not fit.

"That's what comes of having eyes bigger than your navel," said Krotch, wheezing.

She rounded on them, spitting, her bells and jewels and ornaments jangling. "You mind your own, you couple of cornlicked clowns, and leave me to mine."

"You can keep it," guffawed Krotch. "I wouldn't touch it with a galleyprod."

"Aaah, get lost," she snarled at them and then, as the new, economy size, bellachrontis flashed into supernal life, she screwed it, cold as it was, into her navel. "There," she said, posturing, forgetting and opening her mouth so they caught the full horror of her gappy smile. "There, boys. How do I look?"

"You tell her, Krotch," said Waley, solemnly.

"Me?" Krotch shook his head humbly. "Who am I to pay homage to that ratbaggagewonderment?"

Her ankle bells tinkled with a sudden surprisingly sweet chiming. She danced, flinging her arms up in artful gestures so her golden breastplates rang as the bangles struck them. Her veils drifted like gossamer. The sun shone down.

"The poor old one-eyed toothless wonder," murmured Waley, touched.

Pirouetting legs danced across the grass; bells chimed; veils flew—and then tottery old ankles gave way and she collapsed amid a sundering splendor of jewels and silks.

"Poor old ratbag," said Krotch. "She must have been a dancer—once."

"What do you mean, once, you unlicked wet nadger's cub?" She shoved up on spindly arms to glare crookedly at them, turning her head to one side so her one good eye could see them past the eagle beak of her nose. "I'm

the best dancer Brianon ever saw and there won't be my like again!"

"I believe you," said Waley. He moved quickly, reached down, took her hand. "Allow me to assist you to rise."

She glared defiance at him, ready to spit between her teeth; then a strange coy look appeared in her bloodshot eyes and she simpered, "Thank you, kind sir."

"Steady on, my old Predakker meat," warned Krotch.

Waley looked at her. Her white arm stretched up and he lifted her, surprising himself at his own gentleness. That arm showed thin corded muscle; but the skin stretched firm and unwrinkled. Her hair, he saw now, was superficially dyed—dyed black from the blonde roots. She was not, as he had suspected, a white-haired old witch, then.

And those teeth—"Can't you ask Pe'Ichen to fix you up with a set of choppers?"

"Pe'Ichen, my gallant, grants only dead things, as well you know."

"I didn't mean new ones growing out of your gums—oh, well, you know best."

The full-color all-moving all-sound vision of Mimi had risen up before Waley and, self-disgusted, he lost interest in this pathetic old dancing girl of days gone by.

"Come and eat the fish," called Krotch. "It is very good."

Eating, they agreed with him.

Sitting with his back pressed comfortably against a silken cushion resting against a treebole, Waley said: "Why don't you put some proper clothes on, you old besom?"

Ste jangled her breastplates at him. He shuddered.

"I'm dressed as I wish to be dressed. Would you gain-say me that, you slopbucket of happypalace throwouts?"

"My, my," said Krotch, clicking his teeth reprovably. He nicked out the fishbone caught between his teeth, belched, and finished on a deeply satisfying eructation: "We should be making Plans."

"I rather care for that capital P," said Waley, perfectly following Krotch's line of thought.

"I don't care what our seven-veiled-prancer does," Krotch went on comfortably, his hands crossed on his bulging rib

cage, "but I rather care for you, my friend. I'm for the city—"

"City?" said Waley quickly.

"Surely. That's where the Green Boys were taking us, all caged and cramped for the market."

"Slaves?"

"No—haven't heard that archaic slopbucket of a word used in ages—no, no, the Green Boys do it all nice and legal and shove us up for auction. We sign up to do the required term of years employment."

Drubal had mentioned slavery as being a bygone institution when he had been tutoring Waley. "Can't see the difference."

"Indentures. We sign up, see?"

Waley didn't, but he felt too much at peace to argue. The Whispering Wizards had dragged him away from Mimi. He wanted to go back. He had little doubt he could find his way; but Krotch had unsettled him with his talk of a city. Fresh adventures lured Waley. He ought to see the city—probably a tumble-down brick and wattle conglomeration of housing horrors—see a little of this world, before he reported back to Mimi and Drubal. Yes, well, they'd expect it of him, wouldn't they? A fine upstanding young blade about the galaxy like him? Of course . . .

Independent Jack Waley.

"Right," said this fine independent Jack Waley. "I'll come with you, Krotch, old friend. I'd like to see this city of yours."

"It's not my city, you scousing slopbucket!"

Waley started up and Krotch spread his beefy hands.

"Your pardon, old friend. Quickness of temper ever brought me low. This city is one of the five cities of the Scorso. I aim to ship out and back home from there."

"Can I walk along with you, then?"

"My pleasure."

Having rested they set themselves to walk toward where Krotch with his woodsman's instincts said the city lay. He banged a fist onto his sword hilt. "If any of those Green Boy little horrors try to scouse us . . ."

Thoughtfully, Waley had Pe'Ichen create a crossbow and

a quiver full of bolts. Together they marched sturdily through the green wood.

A shout arrested them and they turned.

Clutching her strings of jewels to her, her breastplates flashing and clashing, the old crone hopped after them.

"Hey, wait for me!"

She tripped in a bangle, screeched, fell flat, clawed up, shedding bits of jewelry and varicolored veils; she ran after them shrieking and cursing and waving her arms, her black-dyed blonde hair rippling after her like the broom bristles of a real honest-to-goodness witch.

VIII

MEROE, ONE OF THE five cities of the Scorso, surprised and dumbfounded Jack Waley. He had expected wattled daubs, crumbling brick, alleys fouled with slime and detritus. He envisaged a pastiche of buried Pompeii peopled with moving ghosts and odoriferous with a life that should have been snuffed out before birth.

The three of them, would-be troubadouric travelers through the green wood, stood now on crisp macadam watching the public transport system working smoothly with great white horses snorting at their work, brightly clad men and women moving in and out of tall office blocks, concrete and glass and synthetic crystal sparkling like starflowers. They saw the hum and throb of a great city about them, smelled the salty remembrance of the sea, heard the echoing reiteration of sadness splintering down from gulls and terns and shags flecking the sky with dapplement.

"Well I'll be—" said dumbfounded Jack Waley.

"Meroe—what a stinking dump," snapped the crone, swishing the crimson cloak they had insisted she wear. "If I'd ever danced here in the old days I'd have knocked their eyes off their stalks, I can tell you. City—huh—collection of hovels!"

"Seems clean and well run to me, Salome," Waley said.

"Smell that seal" exclaimed Krotch, striding on, his face aflame. "Once aboard a galley—"

"—lugger—" put in Waley absently.

"—and it's full tread for Brianon!"

They passed a group of young men—all in their early twenties and dressed in foppish good taste with much lace and fur and extravagant length of hose—and Salome leered at them, bobbing her head, stretching her lips, undulating her thorax. Krotch rumbled. Waley, faintly, said: "Come on, Salome. They'll run you in."

"Ah—in the old days! Those lollygagging slopbuckets would have been pushing their behinds to the sky and kissing the hem of my gown, fighting to gain my slightest favor!" She wiped away spittle and trailed after them. "The ungrateful lardy-splitting-shtooks!"

"If you haven't been here before, Salome," Waley said gently, "they couldn't have seen you dance; could they, now?"

"What's that got to do with it, scouse?"

"Well—" Waley could feel the eyes of the youths behind drilling through his back.

"Can't they recognize a lady when their blood-shot piggy-little peepers spot one, hey?"

"Oh, come on, Salome!" snapped Krotch, striding ahead, his great sword slapping his flanks. He had taken to calling the old crone Salome after Waley had thus dubbed her. Now the eternal scent of the sea inflamed his nostrils and expanded his lungs.

Salome sniffed at them and hitched up her gown, jangled her bangles, played a few bars of insulting music with her ankle bells and jigjogged after them.

Waley had been born as the child of an interstellar civilization that accepted swift and smooth transit between the stars as routine, who lived in planetary cities or garden cities or agricultural planets as the whim and the pocket dictated. He chose to omit from his memories his period on Laz-enby III where agriculture had tried to tame wild Jack. So now, as he walked along the canyon streets of this alien

city he cataloged it on the scale of planetary civilizations he had known.

As Ulysses in the pleasant land of the Phaeacians discovered bittersweet reminders of his long-unseen homeland of Ithaca, so here in Meroe of the five cities of the Scorso did Jack Waley find anguishing remembrances of the cities of the civilized galaxy he had known. He turned unbidden to stare at the rag-and-bone jewel and golden-plated apparition of Salome with her one eye and her snaggle-toothed mouth and he said plaintively: "A fine Nausicaa you turned out to be. Nauseating Nausicaa."

"What split-tongued gobbly-gobbly language is that, then?" demanded Krotch, half checking his stride.

"Just thinking aloud, comrade," said Waley in the Keri-matic. "What's that up ahead?"

"Dock area. That's where the galleys tie up. With luck and a favoring tide we'll tread out tonight!"

Waley passed over this second reference to treading. He was still learning, in language as well as custom.

"But first, after our little jaunt through the green wood, I need a drink!" Krotch moved his tongue over his lips, a red hand stroking the hair of his beard and moustache.

"Those are sweet and bonny words, you ugly apology for a man," said Salome with unexpected courtesy. "But just how do you expect us to pay for a drink?"

Waley looked at the jewels bedecking her wizened person, thought of Pe'Ichen—and was smart enough to deduce the problem.

They attracted little attention among the passersby; even Salome, with her cloak covering the incredible constellations of adornments, assumed the guise of an old woman walking with her son and grandson. When Krotch mentioned this in a kindly tone she screeched at them, lifting her claws.

"You blubber-bodied slopbucket of a scousing raggety-tag! Me—your mother! Why, my white body would revolt at the thought—"

And then both she and Krotch paused, and a heaviness, a silence, a flutter-of-death's-wings hiatus, drew both their mouths down and set bitter lines defeatedly dejecting both

their faces. Again that impression of a sadness so common as to be passed over in everyday conversation reached Waley with a chill. He said:

"How do we pay for the drink?"

In Drubal's village money had not entered the scheme of life, and living there in that forest paradise Waley had never questioned the rightness of the absence of the root of all evil. But in a city like this—some form of easy-to-carry and generally respected currency would be essential. Barter could sustain relatively high cultures; Waley had yet to find a civilization of the order of the one he was evidently inhabiting subsisting without currency. Barter was good and fine; but . . .

Labor. That, decided politico-social-with-it Jack Waley, must be the answer. A currency of service. A similar arrangement to that existing back in Solterra's European Middle Ages, so he had been told, when a man's life would be dedicated to his master, on up the scale. This might easily explain Krotch's casual references to Indentures in place of slavery. Although—looking around and admiring the sky-scouring structures, the clean streets, the clip and clop of horse-drawn vehicles—Waley figured this city to be a cut above a Middle Ages town. Why the Middle Ages—the medieval lapse—had been called that when they'd followed on primitive chaos and been done with and over along with the first couple of scientific-technocrat civilizations, Waley had never been sure. Compared with even a pioneer planet of the Solterranean expanding culture, this city showed as a mere opusculum of the terraformers' art.

"We'll pay," Krotch said, with a leer at Salome.

She jangled her bracleted wrists against her breast plates.

"I was never like that—" Her screeched quavering protests shook her scraggy throat.

"Wrap up, duchess," Krotch said. "Act your age—d'you think anyone without a gallon of jou juice in him would even *see* you?"

"You lollygagging slopbucket—"

"In here," said Krotch, and Salome and Waley found themselves massively decanted through a side door fronting the main street, the imposing center entrance a little

further on, with signs loudly shrieking: DOLLY'S DALLIER.

"Hey—" said Waley.

"Take your scousing hands off me—" screeched Salome.

"I know Dolly," growled Krotch. "Shut your meat-holes, both of you, and let me talk. You"—he jerked a thumb at Solome's navel bellachrontis—"show a bit more of that and"—he swished her cloak half across her blazing one-eyed face—"less of that. C'mon."

Dolly turned out to be a surprise. Waley had learned a great deal from Krotch during their green wood tramp, lore of the forest and of hunting and he could bring down a bird on the wing with an accurate quarrel at fifty yards. Now, it seemed, he was going to learn about the seamy side of city life. He chuckled a little patronizingly. Perhaps Krotch might learn a little from *him*, gay gallant about the galaxy Jack Waley. . . .

Salome had a piece of her cloak stuffed in between the irregular snags of her teeth and she umphled and aargled, afraid to rip it out too drastically. Krotch with one loving hand alongside her cheek, her face half turned away from Dolly, smiled with all his masculine Pan-charm that made the girls forget the white glimmer of his scars.

Dolly listened to Krotch and sniffed suspiciously at Salome. "Does she sing, too?" she asked with sweet syrup sarcasm.

"Oh, no, Dolly, my brave lilly of the wild wood—"

"Cut the cackle, Krotch. You're a rot-gutting ratbag and I listen to you only because you owe me a dozen green-skins. Can she?"

"As a leaf in the wind, oh jewel—"

"Flip, Krotch. Let's see."

Dolly hitched her ample rear onto a table in the rear kitchen to which Krotch had led them, a fire smoky in the hearth, pans coppering the shadows with suns; the flavors of onions and stews and rare herbs mingling and giving the lifeblood of earth to the headier aromas of wines and other potent potions that made Waley, for one, lick his parched lips.

She was, as Krotch would have said, a fine buxom red-

blooded toothsome morsel, ample where amplitude could be heard, lean where leanness counted. Dark bright eyes brooded on Waley and made him feel the back of his neck for the unwashed execra it was. A large, overflowing, fecund woman, with self-indulgent lips and suet-pudding dimples. Nice on a cold night.

A proleptic arrangement between Krotch and Dolly awed and amused Waley.

Her loose silvery wrap-around, an alien-fashioned cheong-sam, allowed one plumply-slender leg to dangle free, fine hairs like down coppering the skin in living emulation of the hanging coppery suns. She smiled now at Waley, thoughtfully, dug Krotch in the ribs so that that sturdy man said "Wump!" and nodded to Salome. "Go on then, girl. My time is precious."

Two cooks in the stiff yellow vestments of their trade came in and began ladling soup and meats steaming with aromas that opened the flood-tides of Waley's taste buds. Their eyes strayed furtively toward Salome; but soon an explosive oath as hot stew cut acidly into tender skin of wrist returned their attention to their tasks. So it was to a jolly tinkling accompaniment of pots and pans, the gurgle of stew, the low muttered curses of a scalded cook, that Salome danced.

Her trek through the green wood had strengthened her limbs; the meat they had eaten had given her sustenance; she danced, jangling and clashing, veils whirling like demented doves seeking an ever-moving perch; danced and whirled and kicked her legs and undulated that magnificent bellachrontis so that Krotch bugged his eyes and even Waley—blasé blade of the galaxy Jack Waley—looked at her instead of the wineskins in the corner.

Salome used her wits. Her veils swathed her face in rippling silks and her hair fell in dyed profusion about her cheeks, caught, so Waley now noticed, in a jeweled comb so that her missing eye's absence lay unsuspected beneath a crowning camouflage. Oh, yes, Salome danced.

"Quite all right, for now, my girl," said Dolly, rising and smacking the parading Salome on her wiggling self. "You'll do. I didn't think you would, but"—with an evil leer at

Krotch—"you can help pay back those twice half-dozen greenskins Krotch owes me."

"You've done a good day's work, Dolly, my flower of the forest—" Krotch began, beaming.

"Thank you—" said Waley, as though Salome was their property, not thinking.

"What did I tell you scousing slopbuckets—" Salome began until Krotch kicked her hard and coughed and blew and laughed heartily at Dolly, his broad body interposing.

Dolly laughed right back.

"The girl can dance," she said tartly. "But just get something to stick in that empty eye-socket—it's disgusting—and fill her mouth up for her—that's grotesque."

"Uh," said Krotch, deflated. "Yes, Dolly."

Dolly snapped at one of the cooks and he went across to the wineskins, wiping floury hands on his white-streaked yellow apron. The cheerful glug-glug of sustenance filled the warm kitchen with promise of delight.

Over the warm sweet spicy wine Krotch and Dolly haggled over payment. Waley listened, trying to fit their words into his own theories. Greenskins, that was the term. Perhaps, then, labor was not the unit—A greenskin? A familiar ring about that. . . .

A gently-heated feeling of well-being stole over Waley. Perhaps all life found a parallel among the stars; perhaps as those original primordial molecules of nucleic acid and protein formed in the self-same way under the same stimulus, so did dancing and drinking and love, life and death, the need for a breast on which to lay the weary head; the continuance and progression of life extended in an unbroken chain of light from stellar system to stellar system, in this spiral arm of the galaxy, throughout all the galaxies of the universe.

Certainly he found it difficult to envisage a culture where dancing had not been born with the first dawn people.

What racial suffering he found among all the people of the Kerim—here in Meroe and within his two comrades from Brianon—could not shut down completely the urge to dance with an abandon that, perhaps, in its invocatory

rites sought in some mystical way to placate that demon of misery, to assuage the planetary grief.

"Mother of pearl," Dolly was saying now, breathing hard, her wine glass filled again. "With a—what is it, girl? Come here, let me see."

Obediantly, undulating, Salome crossed to Dolly, who stared into her one good eye.

"Blue," said Dolly as though the first to make the discovery. "A shiny spot of blue paint, I think." Then—"By all the niddershinning lollygagging cluties, Krotch! This girl of yours—she's *old!*"

"No older than you, you sag-bellied fat old—" began Salome in her usual style.

Krotch twisted her cloak about her mouth. "Pay no heed to her vinegary mouth, Dolly, my rose of the dawn! She may be past the first flower of youth; but she can dance. You have seen that—"

Dolly's eyes had flamed angry protests at Salome's words; but now she looked at Krotch and her face softened. She punched him lightly on the bicep. "I ought to wrap you in a cage and get you treading for those four third-dozen green-skins, you artful lollygagger—but . . . but . . ."

Krotch, releasing Salome and booting her away, leaned toward Dolly and kissed her, like a preliminary wrestle between two rhinoceroses delirious with mud. "You're a good kid," he said, meaning it.

Waley felt it an inappropriate time to mention Krotch's intentions of boarding a galley and sailing for home.

In that instant a dull booming roar—a sound that carried familiar overtones of terror—thundered through the floor, shaking the pans, tilting the wine glasses, making them chingle merrily with the bright doomed tocsin note of the bells ringing for the damned.

"What—" said Waley, starting up.

No one else seemed to be bothered.

"That's at least five blocks away," said Dolly, steadying her glass. "My place is still strong and good for another hundred years." She laughed bitterly. "Not that anyone will be here to come in for peace and good fellowship and

fine wine to Dolly's Dallier then." A tear oozed gently down the rounded bulges of her face.

Krotch put his arm around her and pressed comfortingly.

"Drink up!" he shouted, waving his glass. "The whole place is falling down—but it doesn't matter! Eat, drink and be merry!" The two cooks dropped their pans with alacrity and sipped their wine, faces aglow from the fire.

Then the elder of the two, face basted by years of steady cooking over open fires, said: "We need more spices and herbs, Dolly. This meat has been long in coming into the city."

Grumbling, Dolly felt about inside her cheongsam, pulled out a watered-silk purse, snapped golden clasps, and pulled out small round discs. Waley bent closer. She looked up, her plump hands closing on the purse.

"Your nose, sonny. I don't want to snap it off."

"May I," said Waley, smiling and holding out his hand, "see one of those—please, princess?"

She giggled at him. "You're as bad as Krotch. Here—"

The round disc was stamped from leather. No signs or symbols showed any value; but that this was money Waley knew without a doubt. He turned it over in his fingers. The color of the leather was rich old emerald, green right through, pliant yet strong, the edges still sharp-stamped from the press. Now how would he call this when he asked Pe'-Ichen for money? Or—?

Krotch said: "Jack is a stranger around here, Dolly. Knows nothing. Could have been dragged from the sea, still wet behind the ears." He flicked the leather disc from Waley's fingers. "Never seen a greeno before, Jack?"

Waley swallowed. But Krotch, dear old tough scarred Krotch, must be all right. "No," he said. "I haven't."

"Straight out of the forest," said Dolly. "A real savage—"

Thinking of Drubal and Mimi, Waley blessed their simple innocence.

"This," said Krotch with the comical air of a schoolmaster quizzing a recalcitrant class, "is the official legal tender"—those must be what the Kerimatic words meant in this context—"of the five cities of the Scorso and of a lot of other places, too. Greenskins. Greenos. Emerald eyes. Money." He

wagged a horny forefinger under Jack Waley's nose. "And even you, with your silent power, cannot get Pe'Ichen to give you any."

"Oh—I see. . . ."

Dolly laughed and snatched the greenskin back. "I heard they trapped five of the Green Boys the other day. They ventured too close on their indenturing villainy."

"Really?" Krotch showed interest. "Who got that fortune, then?"

"Priamber Mismic—the big ship-owner. He'd do anything for money. I hear he even prefers to pay for trifles rather than ask Pe'Ichen—"

"Pride," said the elder cook harshly. "His pride will be his downfall. By the grace of Pe'Ichen we live the full life."

"You mean—?" said Waley, mouth agape.

"Of course." Krotch slapped him on the back. "I tell you, Jack, if I hadn't liked you and if Salome here hadn't threatened to scream her lollygagging head off, I'd have knocked a Green Boy over the head and brought him along instead." He laughed as though at a jest.

Waley looked at the disc of leather. Of green leather. Skin. Greenskin. From a Green Boy. Pe'Ichen would not create living matter. Nor dead once-living matter except under circumstances known only to him. It fitted.

This currency you had to earn the hard way.

"The Green Boys bring in their captives and we buy them with greenskins. The Green Boys' religion demands that they bury all of their dead. They do anything to get back all the Greenos they can." Krotch laughed cynically. "They dislike our processing that gives their skin that deep emerald color. As a system it's fine—"

"I'm sure," said choked-up Jack Waley.

Krotch drank more wine and the fumes must have tangled up in his head, loosening his tongue, for he dropped into a semi-maudlin reminiscent tone. "Frontiersman, I am. Chief Predakker-killer, a good solid rank, in the Guild. But I took to wandering when my boy died—died he did when we can spare no one. I voyaged over the sea. I walked long lonely leagues." He put an unsteady arm around Dolly,

who simpered. "But I found me a sure haven, a good friend, a soft bed. Predakkers, Green Boys, what do they all mean beside—"

"That's enough of that, Krotch!"

Dolly snapped up, her face strained. She took Krotch's glass and put it carefully down on the table behind them. "You go and clean up and have a little nap. I'll spruce your Salome up—"

"She's not my Salome—"

"I know." Dolly's face twisted for a moment in ferocious possession. "If I'd thought she had been you'd have been out of here with a pan to belt your backside."

"Good old Dolly—" The words came fainter now.

"Go and sleep it off." Dolly caught Salome's arm, pushed Krotch away. He staggered, smiling foolishly. The wine had hit him hard and suddenly and Waley wondered why.

The two cooks went out and Salome and Dolly moved toward a door in the rear wall. Abruptly, Waley felt naked. He took a step forward; the party had dissolved about him, treacherously.

"What about—" he began.

"Just rest there a moment, Jack." Dolly smiled, all lip and eyes and rolling flesh. "I'll send someone in to look after you."

The wine that had so subtly removed Krotch's toughness and given youthful agility to Salome gave only to Waley a feather-touch of eupepsia and he strolled to the fireplace and picked up a leg of meat, familiar animal from their time in the forest, and began to eat, tearing with strong teeth at the juicy flesh. Where, then, was that other Jack Waley who would have looked for a can-opener?

He licked greasy fingers, sighing with satisfaction, and heard the door open. Casually, he turned to look.

She was not beautiful. She could have been pretty, but that she was crying. Her bodice was ripped open, orange cloth and yellow strings and white skin; her fluffy cardboard-yellow hair was disheveled. Her figure showed an excitement of promise to Waley, starved with the meat bone stilled in paralyzed fingers. A tear dropped from her eye to fall with a clearly audible splash in the silence.

"Please help me!" she said, running toward him, heaving, her arms out. "Oh, please! I have no one else to turn to."

Waley admired her, admired her even more as she clung sobbing to him, the orange cloth of her dress all billowed and tucked and no impediment. He stroked her hair. "Of course I'll help you. . . ."

"I must get away—now, this minute—they're being beastly to me. . . . Say you'll help me to get away!"

"Yes, yes, of course. Just—" Here Waley moved a trapped arm and the bone fell to the floor. "Let's get more comfortable."

"Anything you like!" Her tear-stained face lifted and the full-carmine lips pouted, soft and shining. "Anything! I'll do anything for you! But only take me away from this place!" She seized his hand. "Come! Quickly. I will show you the way."

"All right." Waley followed her to the door. Then, hesitating, said: "But what's all this about? Who's being beastly to you?"

"I'll tell you all—but please come quickly!"

He heard the door behind open, squealing, and the girl screamed—softly—and scrabbled with shaking hands, closing the orange cloth above her waist, pulling and tucking, her sobs agonized. "Oh—there he is! Oh—save me, save me!"

Waley turned sharply.

A young man, pleasant-faced, dressed all in some dark blue material, tight at knee and below, aflame with brass buttons, advanced toward Waley. He saw the girl and his face changed to a hard hating look of ruthless anger.

"Out of it, you!" he snapped. "Pardon me, sir, while I deal with this harpie—"

"Oh, the horror of it!" moaned the girl, pressing her softness against Waley's arm. He shook her off.

"What have you been doing to this poor girl?" he demanded with a savage ring to his voice that, he hoped, would prevent further unpleasantness. His stomach felt loose and he swallowed two or three times. A light roaring in his ears like waves on shingle seemed more to drive him forward than to lull him.

"Save me from him, sir! He's the sort who—"

"Shut your foul mouth, harpie!"

"Now, now, that's not the way to talk to a girl—"

"You don't understand—"

"I understand you've been molesting this poor girl! What would Dolly have to say about that? Eh, tell me that!"

"Dolly!" He laughed as though the jest was rich. "She'd tell me to do just as I am going to do now." He tried to push past Waley, grabbing for the girl. "Out, you!"

"He's trying to push me out so he won't have to answer for his crime!" The girl clung to Waley's left arm.

Waley was not thinking too clearly; he had no desire to stand as a silver-armored knight championing distressed damsels; but he was a man and his manhood was now, quite evidently, in question.

"Leave her alone!" he said peremptorily.

"Oh, come now, sir! A little—"

"I know your sort!" Waley for all his sins had never descended this far. He organized it better, he hoped. "Chasing the serving wenches, pinching their bottoms, cuddling in the pantry. Well—you've gone too far this time!" A fine free chivalrous feeling cheered Waley.

"What!" The young man's face beetled with anger. "Just let me—"

Waley hit him.

He punched him all nice and clean on the jaw.

Rubbing his knuckles that stung, Waley looked down on the young man, supine on the floor, like the Great White Hunter over his carefully prepared sacrifice.

"Oh—sir! You're wonderful. But we must get away—quick!"

Dragged to the door and out into the street, Waley yet had time for one backward glance for his conquest, lax and sprawled, on the floor. Yes—well, there was something to be said for that kind of elemental organizing that set it in a different sphere of enjoyment from, say, organizing a seat at the captain's table.

And look how that had turned out.

Feeling a riproaring thunderer of a man, Jack Waley fol-

lowed the girl rapidly along the street, smelling in his capacious nostrils the tang of the welcoming sea.

She hurried him along until, with a furtive look over her shoulder, she hustled him down a narrow alley. Ahead he saw masts with furled sails like half-made sausages, rising over intervening roofs. She found a small door in a large shed and minced inside. Gloomy, the place smelled of garbage and cabbage and baggage.

"Up here, sir. I'm a poor honest working girl. My father and mother work here and I have a small room, clean though. . . ."

"If you are safely home—"

"Oh, you must come up." She grasped his wrist again. They ascended a wooden ladder loud of tread and thrust through a door and then, fumbling their way through a room that lay in total darkness, his only guide the thrilling pressure of her fingers on his wrist, they brushed past a yellow curtain and so into the holy shrine where . . .

Yes . . .

Jack Waley knew well enough why he had agreed to all this. One look at that disheveled bodice had settled it all for him.

The room contained no bed. Furnishings, drab, with a sorry city slickness to them that cried aloud their drabness compared with the simple homely articles in Mimi's home, could not make of this room a home. The girl put a finger to her lips. Her eyes promised. She let her orange bodice fall away fully now, reaching to a peg behind the opposite door for a sea-green gown, all sequins and feather adornments.

"Just let me change into this and then—and thank you, kind sir—"

Waley took a step forward, his arms out. She giggled.

"My bedroom is through that door—"

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

She giggled again, a feral tremor of excitement laying a tremble along her limbs and a brightness to her eyes. In the light from the cracked window, dim and opaque, she looked invitingly lovely. "First—" She opened the door and went through, leaving the door half open.

Boldly, feeling good, hitching up his pants, Jack Waley followed.

The boards beneath his feet sprang lightly as he walked as though suspended, not fully supported on joists. The sea smell wafted up from below, strong and noisome with mud and shrimp and rotting wastes and seaweeds. He pushed on, going blithely through the door. . . .

At first he did not comprehend where he was.

A voice, harsh and male and whiplike, said: "Another one, eh, Coral? Very sweet. Good muscles, too. And he's come here of his own free will." The voice neared and Waley, his eyes vainly trying to tell him where he was, his ears full of the noises of the sea, creaks of rigging, sigh of planking, slap of water, heard the voice at his ear say: "You came here of your own free will. No one forced you to come. You happy little treader!"

He could understand what his eyes were telling him now.

He stood on a ship, in a kind of cage, under a sun beating down sternly, masts and rigging swaying and running confusing shadows everywhere. The girl was cringing away, stuffing greenos down her bodice. A man, a giant of a male animal, all hair and hide and boots and gargantuan whip, bestrode him, shouting with laughter.

Waley tried to scuttle back through that treacherous door.

The giant bellowed, still laughing, flicking with his whip.

"We've another happy little treader! Grab him, you scuttle-butted-lollygagging-rotbottomed-schools! Greet your new comrade!"

IX

BRASSILY SUSPENDED between the burning sea and the burning sky with heat shimmer around outline denuding solidity of substance, a painted abstraction of a ship sailing a splotched-on stirred-up hocus-pocus surrealistic sea, the gal-

ley *Moonflower*, seven days out from Meroe of the five cities of the Scorso, labored with detumescent sails against the horizon. Without wind to give reason to the segregation of quarters smells transferred themselves, changing the places of master and indentured, bringing out pretty scented kerchiefs and opening nostrils too-long clogged with the unmentionable although natural odors of humanity.

How had the mighty fallen! For Jack Waley—poor, gullible, lecherous Jack Waley—the trap had swung down with grinning teeth and raking claw.

And all of it, every last frantic despair, was all of his own making.

Oh—benighted Jack Waley!

Trapped, caged, barred in, he had resisted and, perfunctorily, had been beaten and whipped below. Waking with a fermenting head, feeling the fetters, brutally beaten, slave-starved, he had tried to reconcile himself to the change in his condition. Gone the happy carefree days with Drubal and Mimi, learning. Gone the happy free-booting forest days with Krotch and Salome, learning. Gone, even, the promise of happy drinking days at Dolly's Dallier, learning. Now, aboard a galley, flesh to be whipped to mechanical use, arms to bulge with muscle, shoulders to broaden—if he lived—he had reached the end of learning. He had learned—too late.

Still and all—he was young, strong, toughened. He ought to stand the life. With the wind in his beard and the oar in his hands, he would pull or push with the others of his comrades in distress, planning the great breakout, developing muscles of iron, sinews of steel, a heart of obsidian. He would lead the revolt, slaughtering the prissy pansy overlords in their silks and satins, reserving the choicest of the—well, time enough for that. . . .

Stubborn Jack Waley, determined to find comfort in the midst of distress. . . .

The wind had driven them briskly all that first day and Waley had listened to the groans and vomitings of other newly indentured, unused to the sea, unused, as was Waley, to the deeps between the stars. Then the wind died.

Aloft, Waley advanced with an almost pathetic eager-

ness, a desire to begin the period of torture, to strengthen his back and arms, develop his muscles, pull with all his heart set on the great day of rebellion.

"Why don't you unfetter our hands?" he asked, shaking the six inch bar, rigidly clamping his wrists together. "I can't row like this."

"Row! Row! Get up into the cage, you miserable little scousing treader!"

Waley looked about the galley *Moonflower* with numb wonder. Trim and compact she was, mused a shaken and shaking Jack Waley, climbing into the cage. His comrades, bearded, stark naked as he, murmured and cursed and climbed into that cage of communal suffering.

At once Waley thought of mice, or budgerigars.

Athwartships six cylindrical cages, beamed from wood, lashed and morticed strongly together, split down the center to form a separate starboard and port line, stretched like lobster-pots. At each outboard end a vast cogwheel—nothing less than that ancient and honored technical term could describe that gear—revolved to engage with a small train of gears, shielded from the sea splashes, ending in the driving spindle to a laboring, grunting, heaving paddle wheel. The indentured climbed into the cage and took their places on the narrow floorboards. On the flat scrap of decking within the rotating cage, anchored to the center line of the ship, stood the overseers. The men had to step briskly from the tread on which they stood to the one above as it came down like an escalator, and then the one above that, that spun down to their level. Down swooped the treads, round beneath them and up, dizzily, on the other side, to arch over their heads and so zoom down breathlessly upon them once more—endlessly.

"It's a flaming treadmill!" screamed Jack Waley, resisting violently. Something extraordinarily cold lay like a spider's silken strand across his shoulders. The next instant that stripe burned as though a million volts had pumped through the lash. "Oooww!" screamed Waley when he could speak again.

He felt himself lifted from the platform by a hand that shook him effortlessly. He stared into the face of the male

animal with the whip who had greeted him on arrival.

"You will tread and tread until you drop, treader!" The great black-a-vised face swam before Waley like a gorilla threatening libel action. "Get back on them treads, scut! Stamp! Stomp! Stamp! Keep going and keep your legs moving for as true as my Whip can take the skin off your backs I'll degut, debrain, devitalize you!"

Perforce, Waley stomped, stamped, stomped.

Where were his dreams of a mighty muscular chest? Where the rippling strength of arm and shoulder? Where the great breadth of shoulder that could lift a mired auto from the mud? Where, oh dreams of yesteryear, where the great rebellion now?

Running—that was all the muscles he would develop in this mouse-house—muscles for running away.

His thighs streamed molten fire. His ankles cracked. His feet swelled. Blisters bloated with tumescence broke and dripped. His knees shook and clapped like kettle-drums. But he treaded on—stamp, stomp, stamp . . .

The paddle wheels revolved and stroked the sea; white froth spumed; the galley lunged ahead, shuddering against the waves. And in their treadmill cages the indentured treaded—stomp, stamp, stomp.

For all those seven days of torture Jack Waley had no other thought than to lift his feet high enough and quickly enough to step onto the next descending tread and to avoid smashing his knee painfully against the weathered wood as it revolved painfully down. Even their periods of rest had no meaning, living as he did in nightmare and ordeal of the treadmill over and over again.

The beast with the whip, the black-a-vised, hairy, hateful colossus of pain, regulated their periods of agony. In the handle of his whip he had a little device that summoned to labor with a merry stridently brittle little "Dingg-dongg."

"Dingg-dongg" would go the chimes and the indentured would fling up from their abandoned postures of half-crazed sleep and crawl and stumble to the cage and mount the ever-turning treadmill, whip flicking like a snake's tongue behind them. Whippy, the beast was called, a fit name and one of which he showed black and broken-teethed guff-

fawed pride. "Dingg-dongg" would go his whip handle and *flick-flick-flick* would go his whip and broken howling men would scramble like pursued rats to their place of exacted torture.

"I can't move today," Waley gasped out on the morning of that burning seventh day. "I'm stiff as a board, Whippy—"

"Mister Whippy, you call me, you scum-bellied, slop-bucket scousing lump of Green Boy offall! Can't move, hey! Well—I'll soon move you, treader! *Stomp*, you useless rat-bag. *Stamp!* you lollygagging scuttlefilth. *Stomp!* you rot-bottomed schoot!"

And *flick* cracked the whip, *Stomp! Flick*, *Stamp! Flick*, *Stomp!* Three stripes of ice and fire cascaded down Waley's naked seamed back. Yowling like the beaten cur he was he scuttled on creaking cracking limbs to the cage, mounted the treads, *treaded* . . .

Mister Whippy "dingg-dongged" his whip and laughed and laughed and upped the tread by ten.

Any time, night and day, morning and evening, that dire "dingg-dongg" would ring merrily out. "Dingg-dongg" and *flick-flick-flick*, and Stamp, Stomp, Stamp . . .

Wooden bars rotating forever down past his head, past his chest, past his hips, past his poor abused swollen abscessed legs, past his numbed unfeeling feet, sunk in pits of private pain, wooden bars forever rotating, rotating, dingg-dongg, *flick-flick-flick*, stomp, *stamp*, STOMP!

He lived.

Just.

After a fortnight he found with the strange uneasy feeling of a man venturing down an unknown and dangerous alleyway in darkness that he could think of something else besides the treadmill. They were fed well—their strength for treading was a precious asset to the ship master. His feet had suddenly hurt abominably, and the ship's doctor, a round oily man with woman's hands, had lanced and swabbed and bound them in clean yellow rags. Now Waley thought as he stamped and stomped, eternally treading.

He thought. Mister Whippy flicked his whip and the narrow deck spun flecks of gold into his eyes; the sea crashed rhythmically as the broad shining paddles dug deep,

rising with a shattering swish of spilled water, sussurating with strength.

He thought; he thought.

A bomb.

That could be the only fitting answer.

A bomb. A lovely, beautiful bomb, all fire and banging and smoke, to blow out the bottom of the *Moonflower*.

Just which moon she was named after Waley neither knew nor cared. This planet possessed at least six and as no one he had yet spoken to seemed to know they lived on something that was a planet—flat-earth, turtled, elephantid idiocies proliferated—Waley had no desire to have himself burned at the stake for the sake of galactic accuracy. A bomb. Yes.

He took to crawling to the same corner in the odiferous hold when they were let out of the cage and soon he had a heap of dust, a few hairs, a splinter or two, a pile of nail parings bitten off his hands. He didn't dare even look at his feet. . . .

As with his vain attempt to conjure an interstellar transceiver from Pe'Ichen, he feared the worst whilst collecting and hoarding his wealth. Overseers, miniature editions of Mister Whippy, prowled restlessly, ever watchful, ever listening for the name of Pe'Ichen.

He sought no co-conspirators. He wanted to know that when the keel of this villainous hell-ship blew out, he, and he alone, had done it. . . .

Oh, arrogant Jack Waley . . .

Change of language had no power to intervene in the mysterious transformations performed by Pe'Ichen; asking in gal-linga proved as effective as asking in the Kerimatic; thought transgressed the barriers of language.

No man shall hold another in slavery. . . . That oft-repeated meaningless tag revolving in the interstellar-centered world of his birth had aroused mirth and scornful, angry laughter, for all men knew that in some things one man would always be slave to another. . . . Jack Waley, now, born free on Earth, had been slave-bound to his stomach and to the men of the great corporations who could fill that void for him. Life itself created slavery by merely being.

But those forms of slavery were veiled and masked and politely hidden: and a "Ten percent cut in wages this week, Jack, and if you don't like it you know what you can do." Blunt—on Earth or the other Solterranean worlds—but here that would have been a feather in the scale of torture. Here, men slaved under the whip and knew they were slaves. Here men *were* slaves and the fact of their slavery although seen smokily through the distorting glass of "Indenture" could not be disguised.

Jack Waley, slave . . .

"At least," he said fiercely to himself as the whipmasters brought around the thin gruel and the rationed meat and bread, abundant but coarse, "I could *choose* my sort of slavery then!"

He had Pe'Ichen create a second dull metal bowl which he managed to secrete wedged half in and half out of the ill-fitting wooden deck beams, covered over with the straw that was their only covering. That straw, now, was going to come in mightily useful. . . .

If anyone found the bowl they would think it merely that, a simple meal bowl left over and forgotten. . . .

Ceaselessly the shipmasters prowled, subservient to Mister Whippy and his imperative dingg-dongg, listening with self-interest in preservation for the first breath of the name Pe'Ichen.

The galley *Moonflower*, with her passengers cosseted aft beneath silken awnings, wined and perfumed and politely punctilious one with another, with the paddles turning and flashing, with the dolorous stomp-stomp-stomp of the treaders filling the cages with plaintive sound like strangled sea-gulls, with all the elegant distant beauty of the ship shining in the sun, at last paddled grandly into the stone-walled harbor of Phyrae. . . .

"Phyrae of the golden women and golden wine and golden slumber!" mumbled an oldster with a face like a horse, fried-egg eyes and dry powdery hair. He had all his teeth and was ever ready to chew up other, lesser dentally equipped men's, leavings. "Golden Phyrael"

"Golden, is it, you schoot-framed lollygagger! You're too old to remember what a woman looks like!" a cracker-

jawed youngster with wild eyes and wild hair and hands that hooked into unrepentant fingers mocked, wildly.

The ship lay at anchor. The treaders lay chained in the holds. The cessation of noise rumbled loudly in Waley's aching head—the slithering wood-against-wood creaking ox-cart lurching sounds of the paddles and the treadmills. Great clumsy lumbering sounds, they had filled his head so full that now they had stopped he felt deaf.

These men around him now, fellow-slaves, were assuming a reality that up to now nothing but the incessant treading and the scarlet schemes of vengeance had possessed; Waley was regaining something of his lost humanity. Most of the men had been indentured through Green Boy machinations; some had been tricked, like Waley; others had fallen foul of the law. The seafaring masters had to fill their power cages in some fashion for voyages on the high seas. . . .

"How long will we stay here?" asked Waley of a man whose chest and abdomen furred black with hair, his heavy face lowering, his lips thick and wet.

"A couple of days, three; who knows? Who cares?"

"I'd like to set Pe'Ichen on all the—" started the horse-faced oldster. A whipmaster cracked the handle down hard on the old man's face, splitting his lip, then kicking him in the guts as he yarbled and fell.

"Never use that name in here!" rasped the whipmaster, his thick face creased, his lips ricked back in sycophantic imitation of Mister Whippy.

The black-haired man rumbled deep in his hairy throat, his face hating. "If only I had the power! The gift given only to the chosen few of Brianon!"

Waley knew what he was talking about and a wild and selfish scheme flashed into his mean mind. He said: "What would you do if—*he*—changed that straw into axes and swords, spears and arbalests?"

"Do?" The man's face twisted lividly with the clamor of his thoughts. "I'd—"

But Waley could not do it. He *could* do it; but he wouldn't. Those chained wretches would go down like the French chivalry at Crecy. He couldn't sentence them to that, no matter that many would have, if given the oppor-

tunity, chosen a death fighting in preference to a death treading. Jack Waley experienced the unsettling effect of having to think about an action and its effect on other people. The sensation was novel.

"... invert their crotches for them," finished the hairy one, dribbling.

Waiting for nightfall Waley dozed fitfully, acutely aware that his numbed senses, only just now regrouping themselves after the hideous onslaughts of the treading, had missed much of the horror of life aboard a galley. He remembered vaguely a towheaded youth with a strabismus vanishing one dingg-dongg, and the echoing splash from over-side. He had slept solidly through a night of moaning and retching from three middle-aged men, brothers, who had struck at Mister Whippy and been punished, *flick-flick-flick*, flayingly, making three more transient holes in the ocean next morning.

His own back bore a crossword-puzzle testament to Mister Whippy's proficiency with the tool of his trade.

His nose served now for breathing; the smell-threshold had long since been passed.

The galley deserved to be blown up. Jack Waley deserved to escape. What might be wrought upon Mister Whippy and his assistants could safely be left to what might follow. But—these men, these indentured, these fellow slaves all about...? What of them?

He spoke softly, tersely, gathered the hairy one, the horse-faced oldster, the towheaded wild youth into his corner, hunkered down on the filthy straw. The wild youth kept idly cracking alien cockroaches and crawly life as Waley talked.

These three would have to do, mainly because they had impinged on Waley's consciousness more than the others. Bril, the hairy, Clark, the oldster, Stram, the wild youth, all bugged their eyes as Waley produced three clean crisp shining toothily-bright files from the straw.

"What—?" "But—?" "How—?"

He took up the fourth file and said softly: "Get filing and don't ask questions. We have friends."

For one agonizing instant he thought he had chosen

badly; but then the three settled down to furtive motion without raising the bestial clamor of anticipated satiated rage he had half and fearfully expected.

Potassium nitrate . . . Sulphur . . . Charcoal . . .

Dust, nail-parings, bits of straw dirt, vanished and were replaced. . . .

In certain proportions, trying to remember with clarity the pranks of those long-ago days on Lazenby III, Waley mixed in his bowl. Carefully the black powder was handled, with the care of ignorance of its exact instability, with the fate of his own life hanging on the first stupid mistake. Sweat stung his eyes.

Bril bulked his naked hairy torso out and behind that imposing screen Waley worked with consuming concentration.

Clark, horse face atwiltch, slobbering, said: "I passed the files on. Tee heel"

"What?" said Stram dreamily, his wild look alarmingly tame. "Just wait 'til I get my hands on Mister Whippy. . . ."

"He'll never dingg-dongg again," chuckled Clark, wetly.

Night. No gleam of light through open port, just the wan glimmer of horn-lanterns positioned at the tops of ladders out of the hold, revealing the uniformed legs of whipmasters, their shoulders and heads in shadow, the hungry, bloody tongues of their lashes drooping down. . . .

Everything lay to hand; everything was ready. Hidden in the straw and fashioned from that straw hid battleaxes, spears, swords, weapons that cried aloud to be used in redressing of indentured wrongs. Waley fingered the fuse and stilled the tremble in his fingers. The others could not understand why they must move away from that conspiracy corner, what devil was to be let loose there. . . .

Waley struck the match. . . . Yellow flame spat and sizzled. He touched the fuse and sparks ran and fizzled and twisted. A small tiny spark, like the seed of a mighty tree, a puny beginning to a powerful performance, that flame lit the torch of freedom.

"What's going on down there?" A whipmaster lifted his lantern, suspiciously began to descend, flicking his whip. His booted feet tromped the stairs in sickening mockery of these men's treading.

Someone reached out a hand and grasped a leg. Someone else thrust home a spear without undue haste. Someone else caught the suddenly dropped lantern.

Sizzle, sizzle, sizzle, went the fuse, casting garish phantom flickering shadows.

A second whipmaster shouted, high and hard. Booted feet on the deck. Bars being thrown back, clanging. The cool unspeakably refreshing tang of night sea air wafting down. Light shafting across white strained faces, across tangled beards, watering eyes, the menacing gleam of weapons. . . .

"Sound the alarm! Turn out the soldiers! *Mutiny! Mutiny!*"

"This is no mutiny," growled Jack Waley, edging back with Bril and Clark and Stram. "This is the day of judgment!"

"What are we waiting for?" howled Bril. "The soldiers will be here with their arbalests any minute!"

Smell of fear, of tense-packed sweating humanity . . .

"We're waiting for—" said Waley.

But there was no need.

The bomb went *Boomp-kerrump-kerrang!* Half the side and bow of the ship blew out. Smoke and flame choked and scorched. Cold green seawater cascaded in, hoary-headed, smashing and snarling.

"Up!"

Battleaxe in one vengeful fist, Bril leaped the stairs. The other indentured, screaming, shouting, pushing, weapons a glistening halo above them, swarmed after. Arbalest bolts flew. Blood flew. Fear, too, flew. . . .

Now the reckoning! Now the day of judgment in all its blood and fury! Now for revenge! Now to repay with blows and cuts every single whiplash!

What Waley saw then he afterwards did not wish to remember.

Men treated like animals react like animals. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord, but men denied their Lord must exact their own vengeance.

Water around the *Moonflower* rolled red in the lights. Anatomical expositions had their discarded detritus tossed

overside. Screams, shouts, prayers, the hoarse snarl and the grunt, the lift of weapons, the fall of bright blades . . .

Waley saw Mister Whippy.

He saw him surrounded, in a cage, *flick-flick-flicking* his whip at the ring of gaunt shaggy filthy men with brighter-than bright weapons surrounding him like the furies. A sword blade met the whip and the lash fell, detumescent of power. Another of the male Eumenides cut shrewdly and Mister Whippy's arm and wrist hung uselessly. The whip handle spun out to sea, whining a parting "dingdongg."

What happened then turned Waley back to reloading his arbalest, choking.

Stram ran wildly past, left arm hanging and spraying blood, blood wet on his naked body, his lips open, shouting, unheard. Bril, solidly killing, his battleaxe a reddened silver reaper, shouted high and hard, unheard.

A whipmaster lay in the scuppers at Waley's feet. The man's head lay near his neck. "You brought it on yourselves," whispered Waley, dropping his arbalest into the redness running in the scuppers. "You stored this up against time, and now the scales have swung and now you are receiving back all that you stored on the other side of the swing." He climbed onto the rail. "I pity you and feel horror for you—but it was all your own fault." He dived into the water.

The *Moonflower* sank into a sea reddened by fire and blood and still the vengeance of the Lord was flouted on her canting decks.

Water green and cool lapped Waley, cleansing his body and cooling his body, soothing in physical balm; but the water could not clear away the images thronging his brain nor take away the sounds he would always hear.

"Your own fault," his feverish mind repeated, over and over. "You shouldn't have done it. . . . But once you had started, this only could be the end. . . . You damned fools!"

X

"You," said Krotch comfortably, pushing back his empty stein and belching, "made a right cod of it, didn't you, my happy little treader?"

"Please." Waley shuddered. "Don't call me that. It has unhappy memories."

"I thought I was teaching you the ways of this land—and, bingo!—you let me down with a scuttle-butted, flossy-floozled, orange-bodiced liparool! Whool!" He brushed a hand across his beard and moustache, spraying wine drops. He lifted the refilled stein, smiling with a lecherous approving leer at the serving wench's trim ankles and plump rear departing to the serving door. "Still—you're learning. Poor old Hardra got a tongue-lashing from Dolly, I can tell you."

"I'm sorry I hit him," said Waley humbly. "But, you see—"

"I know, son; I know! Hardra told us what the harpie was at. By the time we got to the docks they'd shipped you out." He chuckled and drank deep, making it a toast to Waley. "But you gave me a fine and fancy excuse for leaving Dolly right away—and still owing her those two half-dozen greenos!"

They sat ensconced in the snug private room of the Golden Calf, the night wind beating at the casements, the lantern light bright on pewter and silver, on ruby wine and the litter of an eaten meal.

"Where's Salome?"

"Where she belongs! Dancing for Dolly." He belched again and leaned forward confidentially. "I'll tell you one thing, Jack. Salome was quite right. They don't know what dancing is at Meroe! Why, here in Phyrae—golden Phyrae of the olive yards—we dance a princess' ring-a-ding-ling! Salome will do very well for herself."

"Poor old crone. I hope her legs hold out."

"Now, Jack—" still with that confidential air. "No one knows you sank the galley—and that I would have loved to have seen!—and anyone who questions a friend of mine has me to answer to—you'll need a living here."

"We-ell—I suppose so."

A strange respect lurked now in Krotch's tough face as he regarded Jack Waley, a respect touched off by garbled reports of fires and gigantic, out-of-nature bangs, when the galley had sunk. Waley had told him what had seemed expedient and Krotch had said, guffawing with beard held high: "Any man who can sink a galley and break free of the treader's cage is a man, Jack Waley!"

Waley supposed he could always set up as a gunsmith, an armaments tycoon. A single thought convinced him that with the speed and accuracy he could achieve with clumsy arquebuses he would not supersede arbalests for more than his life time. And no one on this world put much store on anything beyond their own lifetime. Three times already, as he had mooched about Phyrae until Krotch had stepped ashore like an apparition come to life, had Waley seen and heard buildings collapse. People didn't seem to mind. They just moved on.

People didn't *seem* to mind. . . . Waley worried at the problem and came up with what could only be the right answer, seeing that here, as in Meroe and with the Kerim, there were no children.

Phyrae had once been an imposing seaport. The town still lay sullenly splendid beneath the sun; but ugly destruction had scarred the streets, and buildings lay all apiece and rubble ringed. Here, as in Meroe of the five cities of the Scorso, public transport and private carriages were horse drawn, hand-pulled. Various factors did not add up, even to Jack Waley, who was certainly no extraterrestrial social studies man. . . .

He stretched his arm, elegant in his new suit of scarlet-faced fawn, for the wine goblet. Old Clark had been quite right—golden Phyrae, golden wine. He preferred the light silvery-golden wine to the more full-bodied ruby that Krotch downed steadily, stein by stein.

"What do you suggest I do then, old friend?"

"Come along o' me! as the saying has it. I told you I hold the rank of Chief Predakker-killer in the Guild of Frontiersmen here in Brianon. Well—I can arrange for you to join the Guild. Oh"—he held up a hand—"you'd have to join the tailers first—"

"Tailers?"

"Yes." Krotch laughed. He was a man who laughed easily and richly. "We call the young scuts that because their shots always nick the tail feathers. See?"

"Yes. Although, come to think of it, in our jaunt through the green wood I knocked down my fair share of dinners."

"True, true." Something had upset Krotch, suddenly, in the miasmic change of mood of these people. He thrust the stein from him, jerkily. "Tailers," he said, heavily. "Well, we've had none o' them for too long. . . . Too long."

The absence of richly spitting invective impressed Waley. Krotch roused himself. "Well?"

Waley nodded. "If you'll have me."

It was a job. He couldn't ask Pe'Ichen for greenos, and short of taking to the woods again, he could not support himself in a city. He had no fare back to Meroe except by treading and that, he solemnly knew, he would never perform again. . . .

"One thing, though," he said, surprising himself that he should bother not only to think about future plans but bother to tell someone else about them. "I want to get back, back to Meroe, that is, and then on through the green wood—"

"Well, of course! You want to go home."

To Krotch, Waley was just a greenwoods backward boy caught by the Whispering Wizards. Let it ride.

"Yes."

"Dolly paid my fare. Anyway, greenos are suspicioned here—"

"Oh, no!" said Jack Waley.

"What?"

"Tell me, Krotch, my old swearing companion. If no greenos here then—what?"

Krotch nodded and put a fingertip to his nose. "Preds. Daks. Predaks. That's what."

"I suppose trade demands interchange? I mean—"

"Sure, sure, but for my dakko a Pred comes higher than a greenskin any day."

Dimly, Waley was picking up the threads.

Chief Predakker-killer. And now money formed from parts of that word. So—

"What," he said, taking a deep breath, "is a Predakker?"

Krotch told him in lively detail, anatomically, spiritually, ballistically. Not economically.

"And the job of the Frontiersmen is to kill Predakkers to make currency?"

"Well—" Krotch looked offended. "In part, old son, in part. We guard the Princess Kerith too. What a girl!" He went off, then, into some private dream-world. "Wouldn't I just like to—and I suppose she'd enjoy it as much as Il Hughugh, that I guarantee!"

Patiently, Waley waited.

A floor-rumble began, trembling the table and shaking the glasses. The serving wench looked in, cap awry, to say: "Coronation Street just fell down. Nothing to worry about."

"I suppose—?" began Waley,

"Don't you worry, me old galley-sinker. People choose good houses to live in, ones that have repaired themselves good and tight recently, before—"

"Repaired themselves?"

"Yes, yes. Although all that stopped—what is it—nineteen, twenty years ago." He cut an eye sharply on Waley.

Waley covered his ignorance by lifting his goblet.

"We had huts," he said, wiping his lips. He daren't offer further explanations, for now, come to think of it, he could never remember Drubal or any of the villagers working on their places. Perhaps their huts repaired themselves, or once had. . . . Preposterous notion . . .

Come to think of it, he had seen no one under the age of about eighteen, nineteen, as far as he could judge. And now this story about self-repairing houses on a hick planet (on a Solterrann planet he would have given no more thought to that elementary technical system) with the same

length of time involved. Something had happened to this planet about nineteen years ago.

"So you'll be a tailor, eh?"

"Please."

"Good! Any man who can bottom a galley and smash a treader's cage will do well with the Frontiersmen." He chuckled, splashing more wine. "We're eating and drinking on the strength of that right now!"

The serving wench reentered, a fresh lamp in her hand, the light golden and slumbrous on her milk-white skin. Her eyes were downcast. Krotch looked at her attentively. Then he said:

"Enough, Jack. Tomorrow we will talk more. But now, your room is waiting. I bid you good night!"

Waley left, shutting the door on his good nights.

He slept soon in his narrow room with the boom of the sea outside and he did not hear the other door open or close.

He dreamed at first wanly and then, with *Bucentaure* a crimson chrysanthemum cracking in chaos, vividly. Maisie d'Angelo and Diana Darkster smiled at him, bare shoulder to bare shoulder, a nimbus pearling their flesh, and then their bodies supported the double image of Mister Whippy, his hairy face aglower twice over above pearl, shimmering and changing into a shadow, a black blot-shadow that lengthened and grew from Mister Whippy's whip into a familiar lumpshape, a wrench, a wrench coming toward him; for he could now see himself in his dream, knowing it to be a dream and yet powerless to drag his imaginings away, seeing the wrench of its own volition spinning and twisting and humming with a great noise. And then the chief engineer seized the wrench, leaping up like a stage devil, and brought it down on Waley's face and for one awful instant it was like the decks and scuppers of the *Moonflower*. . . .

He awoke standing stark and rigid in one corner of the room, bedclothes tangled between him and the bed, his teeth chattering.

Damn that chief engineer—and damn Maisie d'Angelo, too—even now, dead and disseminated in space they could

still rob him of an honest night's sleep. More shaken than he liked, he stumbled back to the bed, punching the Kerim pillow, stuffed with old corks, and slept if not the sleep of of the innocent then the sleep of the not yet caught.

Insomniac Jack Waley—? Never!

Early next morning after a filling meal of pancakes and syrup, delicious slices of an unidentifiable meat called macne and a goblet and half of the golden wine of Phyrae, Waley set out with Krotch, riding the Kerim equivalent of a horse. Muscular and globular, long-legged and hard in the mouth, his horse knew its own mind. They jog-trotted out of the seaport and Waley turned in the blanket-covered wooden saddle to stare back and down on the town. With that rectilinear layout, those crystal blocks winking back the morning sun, the avenues straight and clean, the town should have been humming with people and with automobiles, fliers, monorails striding angularly into the country. Instead, a few men and women moved about idly and horse drawn transport clipclopped where electric batteries should have powered silently. Waley wished he knew more galactic socio-political history, more georealtik of civilization's rises and descents.

As he watched, an apartment block tilted, cracks spider-webbed all one side, and then the whole construction canted like a cardboard box kicked on a corner, collapsed.

The hard sounds reached them as they turned their horses back to the road.

"The whole place is falling down about our ears," Krotch said, half to himself, grumbling, subdued.

This morning he had turned himself out in a uniform finery that impressed Waley by its practicality wedded to ostentation. A brown cuirass tried to encompass all Krotch's impressive rib cage; green puffed and slashed sleeves and breeches, yellow hose, scarlet shoes, a jaunty scarlet cap, feather aslant in the sun, gave him an aura of gaiety that vied with the grimness of his sword, his arbalest, his quiver, his brace of dirks stuffed down his hose. Still he had kept his great shaggy hairy cloak, furled like a bird's wing, it is true, by a bellanchrontis-studded golden chain, but a vivid reminder of the Krotch of the green wood. His beard and hair

had been trimmed and he looked now only twice life size.

"We'll get Pe'Ichen to fix you up with a Frontiersman's kit as soon as you're sworn in," Krotch told him.

The wineskin slapping at his saddle bow would never last the journey, that was for sure.

Soon Krotch began to sing: "*Oh the men of the Frontier are brave men and bold; But like everything else they're growing too old—*"

He drank fiercely and said: "That's enough of that lolly-gagging slobbucketing scousing song! It's enough to put the leaping jilly-willies up a man's spine!"

He began again, a lilting coarse repetitive refrain:

*"We fare to the north and we fare to the south,
We pred with a dak and we dak with a pred,
Our princess' eyes are blue-oh
Our sweet princess' eyes are blue!
Oh, we'll shoot you a bolt and we'll bolt you a
shoot,
We'll split a wand and we'll wand a split,
Our princess' eyes are blue-oh
Our sweet princess' eyes are blue!
We'll snatch and we'll snotch, we'll krimes and
we'll krotch,
We'll predakker a man's predak,
All for the sake of a pair of blue eyes
Our princess—
Hoi! Hoi! Talk of the predakking shoots itself!"*

He reached down easily and lifted his arbalest from its sling, one handed; the other hand already freeing a quarrel from the quiver.

"What's the song mean?" asked Waley.

"Mean, son, mean? How do I know? Just look up yonder. Now we'll see how many real dinners you can earn!"

Waley followed the jerked gesture. Up there in the blue a dot circled, a dot that swelled in size as leathery feathery wings beat lazily, sure with purpose.

"You'll get one shot, Jack. After that you'll have to use whatever you've asked Pe'Ichen to create for you."

Waley lifted his own arbalest and drew back the string. His hands shook. Then he clumsily dropped off his horse, to Krotch's agonized shout of disbelief, and ran to the roadside. A leaf, large and broad. A stick, long and straight. A rapid: "Pe'Ichen—a shield, tough and balanced, a spear long and sharp—and make it snappy!"

He caught a glimpse of the Predakker now, closer, wide wings churning without motion in a long glide, a multi-dentated beak agape, scarlet flickering claws stretched like insane razors.

Awkwardly he mounted up again. Krotch breathed out and said: "For a minute back there, Jack, I thought . . ."

The Predakker swooped.

Then: "Hoi, hoil The schoot's turning! It's not attacking us! The scousing coward . . . Come on, Jack, *ride!*"

The Predakker plunged into the cover of stunted trees ahead. The horses picked up speed and the clatter of their feet sounded like machine gun fire across the heathland. Krotch leaned out over his horse's neck.

"Come on, my beauty! Stir your zip-zoppering stumps! Gallop!"

Jerking up and down, wrenched backward and forward, grasping the reins with a drowning clutch, Waley followed. He gasped for air. His rear strappadoed. His legs were on fire. But he galloped after Krotch.

Beyond the thicket of low bushes two women and two men crouched in a hole, burrowed by animals, beneath a fallen mass of tangled branches. Another man lay on the road, his horse nuzzling what was left of his head.

Of the other four horses there was no sign. One of the women, elderly, motherly, plump, was crying. The two men carried arbalests and were clumsily trying to shoot them without emerging from their shelter. The fourth trapped in that den of misery had been pushed more deeply in than the others and Waley could see only a rich cloak and a blaze of golden-red hair.

"There is little room for shelter here," said the elder

of the two men, breathing with a harsh rattle. "But you are welcome—"

"I, Krotch, do not shelter from a Predakker!" said Krotch with a pride that brought Waley up, astonished.

"You don't understand—" babbled the second man, young, weak-faced, his slender girlish hands fumbling uselessly with the arbalest.

Krotch cocked an eye. The Predakker swung lazily above them, watching. "He's waiting for his mate," Krotch said matter-of-factly. "It would be best to kill this one before the pair make a team."

"Surely he's out of range," protested Waley.

Krotch dismounted. He walked a little way past the tangle of bushes where the dusty rutted road joined abruptly with a road fashioned from ochre bricks. He began to limp and then lay down on his back, the crossbow perched on that magnificent rib cage.

"Remember, Jack. Nail him with your first bolt!"

The Predakker lowered in the sky channels, interested.

"A human snare, Larnel! The man has courage!" The older man spoke crisply, his strong teeth gleaming over his neat beard.

"Courage, my dear Jarfon, is what the Frontiersmen traffic in! It does not impress me." Larnel still had not reloaded his shaking arbalest.

Waley looked at the young man, Larnel, seeing the foppish clothes, the glaring colors, and took an immediate dislike to him. The other, Jarfon, seemed of tougher fiber.

Something about Larnel stirred a memory in Waley; he could not pin it down; but the young fop brought up a strange image of familiarity, as though he stared into a mirror to find the secrets of yesterday.

The Predakker's rusty wings squealed as it turned, tail spread, leathery neck an S-shape of desire. Waley wiped his forehead. The evil shape passed over him and the shadow flicked like Mister Whippy's whip.

"Now!" shouted Krotch.

They both loosed.

Krotch's quarrel took the Predakker in the breast.

Waley's stirred tail feathers.

The Predakker plunged its wings into the air, a raucous screeching, hideous, a splattering of red drops striking the dust like miniature bombs, a thrashing and a laboring as the Predakker *rose*. . . .

"Behind you!" said Jarfon calmly. "Guard yourself!"

Terrified, Waley turned. The second Predakker, cunning, swept in low and hard like a hedge-hopping nuclear-bomber. Its great agape beak scarlet, and its head straightened on its neck like a lance.

Always reload, Drubal had said. . . .

Frantically Waley rolled on the dusty road, clawing his newly-made shield up over his body, ducking his head down. He thrust the long spear up and out awkwardly before him. . . . Sweat slicked on the shaft. Taste of dust lay flat and floury on his tongue. He spat. The beak rushed toward him like the open maw of a furnace. The wings flapped creakingly once, twice; the beady eyes keeled this way and that, lining up the target. His whole body screamed with fire and pain. He saw the spear head glance against horny neck covering, deflect. He saw the shining point meet feathered breast squarely. He saw the point disappear and then he was smashed backward, legs in air, shield still entangled with him, the haft of the spear chiming on the road and the wood splintering and breaking and sudden redness spouting over his new clothes.

". . . the scousing lollygagging zip-zoppering slopbucket of a schoot!" Krotch was rumbling, his open mouth funneling wine-fumes into Waley's face.

"Mind your tongue!" The voice of Larne, high-pitched, contemptuous, in command again after the danger had passed. Waley knew that tone of voice, had heard it many times from the effete masters of society.

Waley could feel the road on his back, the numbness of nothingness in his legs, the sun on his face. Then a coldness told him that someone had bent closer, cutting off the sun. He opened his eyes.

Mimi? Diana? Maisie? No—they had never been like this golden glory that hung about him now. For long moments he stared up into that face, a face that he would never be able to erase from his memories.

Then: "He is awake, my lady. Let us, I beg you, go home." The elderly woman's voice.

"Very well, dear Rowena. Let us go."

Krotch's strong arms lifting him to horse, the clipclop of hooves, the gentle jig-jobbing, the rocking sensation of a baby lying in its cradle. . . . Home . . . He wondered what home could be fit for a girl like that.

And so, moving with the exhausted pace of reaction, the little company rode for the seven mountains of Manicoro and for the home of the Princess Kerith of Brianon.

XI

"RIGHT, ME OLD lapsaloozer, you've been gravely ill, but you're on the mend now and you'll be out scousing Predakkers in no time." Krotch's cheerful booming voice roused Waley from a muddled dream of Earth and starships crackling in space and of a chief engineer punishing with just wrench the ignorant pranks of a stupid child.

He sipped hot broth and then ate, with unexpected relish, crisp macne. Golden wine of Phyrae glittered silvery-golden invitingly at his elbow. He sat up in the bed in the Fraternal Hall dormitory and thought about living again.

"You've been taken on as a tailer—I saw to that."

Waley laughed. "You were right, old friend."

"Take me for a lollygagging innocent, then? Always, the first shots at a Predakker, the tail." He rubbed his bristly beard and whiskers affectionately. "The jooshny schools fly so fast, drat their leathery hides."

"But," said cunning Jack Waley, "that hide—that's currency."

"That's my boy." Krotch smiled down. "You'll get your share. Your spear fair broke the thing's backbone."

"What's going to happen now?"

"Well now, that's the strange thing." Krotch stood up,

bulky and shaggy in the dim dormitory, the shades drawn against warm afternoon sun. "Odd things have been going on in Brianon since I left. Odd. The princess, bless her charming blue eyes, has the idea we can find the answer if we find Pe'Ichen—"

"Find Pe'Ichen?" Waley lowered his wine glass, astonished.

"That's what the man says." He sat on the edge of the bed, jumpy and unsettled. "Jarfon of Trewes, the chief minister of state, has hold of this idea and the Guild are to provide escort for the journey. I shall be going, of course, as is only right, my rank—"

"And me?"

"We'll see. You'll have to get better, able to tread a shift without—hey!" He ducked as Waley threw an abandoned crust at him.

"I want nothing to do with treading! When I think of Mister Whippy and his peremptory dingg-dongg—I shudder."

"Yes, well, that's over now. Hurry up and get well."

Comradeship turned out to be a funny affair. From a naked, hairy, scarred unknown, Krotch had turned by—it seemed inevitable—natural degrees into a staunch companion, the champion to guide Waley through this alien land. Waley had the uncomfortable conviction that he, intemperate Jack Waley, had changed a little along the journey. The idea of wangling a seat at a captain's table for a girl appeared to him, now, infantile in conception. If the chit wanted to sit there so badly, then let her ask for the privilege in the open way. Probably the reason she hadn't been asked was because she didn't deserve the empty honor.

His thoughts were a little confused now: images of Drubal and Mimi impinging with a kind of haloed yearning; images of the green wood and the Green Boys; Salome dancing; images of treading the glinting paddles, Mister Whippy and his lash, the crimson laughing rose of the explosion tearing out the heart of *Moonflower*.

Waley dozed as Krotch tiptoed out, making only twice as much noise as an ordinary man. Waley smiled, contented.

Lucky Jack Waley.

By the time his Predakker-inflicted wounds had healed he had received his share of the spoils: twenty coin-sized discs fresh from the Mint. Each piece of leather had been cleanly stamped, the edges sharp and fiber-free, the circle true. In all his ignorance, Waley knew this to be Predakker leather—the bronze sheen darker and more lustrous from the impregnation vats; but leather that could be cut only from a Predakker.

"Twenty dakkos, my lapsaloozer! All your own!" Krotch had swollen since they had come to roost in the Fraternity Hall of the Guild of Frontiersmen—if such a tumescence upon stature such as his was possible—and now his wild hairy look betokened the fighting man at home among his peers. Privately, Waley felt no one would better Krotch

....

He had walked cautiously down the ninety-nine steps to the courtyard where yellow and sapphire water tinkled everlastingly from fountains elegantly carved into the forms of Predakkers. The motif was common. He had seen and spoken to other tough, bearded, loud-laughing men of Krotch's stamp, Frontiersmen all. They were gathering for the great pilgrimage of their princess. He had seen the soldiers, too, neat trim men in their yellow and bronze; had savored the jocular rivalry between the groups. Carefully he had searched out this new piece of his life's background.

The first day he felt strong enough to take a constitutional along the boulevards of the city of Brianon in the land of Brianon he walked buoyantly, with a spring in his step, anxious to be out in the world again.

Meroe piled on Phyrae, with an aura of aliveness all its own, Brianon enchanted Waley, despite the railed-off areas where buildings would soon fall. Horse-drawn carriages passed. Men and women walked the streets, busy about their tasks. That planet-wide haunting sadness brooded here, too. The absence of children cried aloud like the wail of a barren woman.

A procession halted Krotch and Waley and they paused to watch. First walked solemn men in black, clearing the

way with staves, their faces long and mournful. Next followed flamens with gorgeous scintillating robes but walking on unsteady feet. Then passed wooden images, lavishly bedecked, flower-crowned, surrounded by neophytes in yellow, bare-footed, singing sorrowfully. Then, the heart of the procession, young girls and young men—each no more than twenty-one and no less, certainly no less, than nineteen—walking hand-in-hand, clad all in sheer saffron; the girls reminding Waley with a queer jolt of Mimi and the green wood; the boys with symbols of procreation; the girls with hands clasped before them, heads downcast, holding each to her chosen mate with a desperation that could not conceal their inner hopelessness.

"It'll be no good," Krotch said savagely. "It never is."

"Marriage?" said Waley. "I always thought marriage was the punishment for those that were caught."

"I wouldn't go on thinking like that, boy. . . . I was a happily married man. . . ." The thick humor of Krotch died visibly. "A lovely girl, a lovely child—but they died, they died. . . . I fared the wide world but I found none like them. . . . Nor will I, ever again. . . ." He roused himself and they walked on past the tail of the procession. "So now I wine and I wench and I shout and swear and vow domneic loyalty to my princess—"

Waley had the sense to inspect the crumbled façade of the nearest building.

"It's a life," Krotch finished, hardly. "A life."

"Those people," Waley said after a decent space. "They are to be wed—"

"We always hope, Jack; always we hope."

"Children."

"The very word carves little pieces off your heart. . . . We thought we'd sinned. We looked for the answers. We tried everything. . . . But nothing, nothing that we do in any way can alter the blight that has fallen on this land."

A world of old people, growing older, with no fresh life flowering to follow after. . . . The idea appalled Waley, young and uncaring though he was.

"If we were faced with a final doom, a worldwide snuffing out of life," he said—cautiously using the inclusive

"we," "then, perhaps, one could see the sense in restricting birth. It has been mentioned as having merited discussing in the past." He stopped and then, not wishing to become involved in explaining away not only Earth history but his own non-Kerimatic ancestry, hurried on: "But this wanton denial of life—this is something—" He didn't have to finish. The men and women of this world had had nineteen years or more to talk through the problem and they understood and felt all and more than Waley could say.

Bumbling Jack Waley.

Ahead of them now athwart the line of the avenue and throwing corn-colored wings to either side lay a long, low, battleship-walled palace, glinting with windows, ribbed and columned and architraved and yet, despite all the munificence of minor ornamentation, giving the strong solid impression of a whale's back stranded in the heart of the city. Banners fluttered from two hundred flagstaffs dentating the entablature. Crisp lawns confettied the graveled approaches.

Waley saw a small globular orange-colored robot—he recognized at once its generic name—gardening with scant zeal, and repressed his cry of wonder. Machines—robots, even—were known to the people of the Kerim! The thought amazed and fascinated him. It was all of a piece with the crystal and steel skyscrapers.

"This is the palace of the Archrail Pordenfors," said Krotch, beaming, forgetting in the minutiae of the moment the besetting barrenness of the land, as did everyone of sane mind. "This is where the Princess Kerith lives when she is in the city."

"Ah," said Waley. "The Princess Kerith. Yes."

Krotch clapped a hand on his shoulder. "I know, old son, and so do a million more. I'd forget any nonsense of that sort."

"I suppose so—"

"Suppose nothing! Wouldn't I—?" He breathed deep and swelled that rib cage. "She is betrothed to Larne of Red Jafare."

"That lollygagging scousing slopbucket!" exclaimed Waley, crimson to the ears, incensed. "It's indecent!"

"I know. And so will you be if you don't keep a civil—a discreet—tongue in your head, me lad!"

Again Waley felt the treacherous bogs of ignorance. Once more he was presuming to step onto sacred ground.

He contented himself with saying, albeit very sotto voce: "I expect she's glad not to have to bear him children."

"They'll try," said Krotch. "Oh, yes, they'll try. Like everyone else. But they'll fail. Like everyone else."

"Have you no faith left, then, Krotch?"

"None. All goodness has leached out of this land. You can smell it. Sacrifice, prayer, example—all are useless. The whole land is bathed in rottenness."

Krotch, it was clear, was in a grim humor today.

Waley stared at the prospect of gray walls and ochre columns, the swinging sweep of architecture, the flags and the robot gardeners, the sun sheathing all in a golden film, the precise flesh-and-blood-automata soldiers in their yellow and bronze, guarding the Princess Kerith. He stared and he knew that this life would never be for him. He had been born into a place in life that never changed no matter on which planet he strutted and rollicked and laughed and wrenched.

A gay blade about the galaxy? Jack Waley? He felt the slender sword at his side, a weapon Krotch had insisted he wear, and he felt a strange unexpected and alarming comfort. He was a man of automation, of cybernetics, of transistorized everything, of nuclear power, of plastics and of the casual pathways between the stars. And yet the feel of a sword hilt in the sunshine, a comrade at his side, a palace and princess to guard—he must be getting senile!

Senile or not he had worked up a valuable thirst and the two comrades stepped out of the sunshine into a snug inn, a ground-floor area of the fifty-story skyscraper nearest the palace, all between grass and trees and landscaping.

"They kept the size of the buildings down near the old palace of the Pordenfors," Krotch said, walking hastily toward a table and banging with an abandoned mug.

"They?"

"The giants who built the city. I don't know. Hey!

Wench! The golden and the ruby of Phyrae for dusty throats!"

When your world crumbled you forgot inessentials. Of what value exact knowledge of the past when there was limited drinking time?

After an hour, Waley said: "I shall now call on the Princess Kerith."

Krotch looked up over the rim of his stein.

"You can't do that! She'll be sending for us soon, anyway, as soon as you're fully recovered. No one calls on the princess without an appointment."

"Don't," said Waley firmly, standing up and grasping the edge of the table, "don't need 'pointment. Old friends."

"Are you trying to be a lollygagging slopbucket, Jack?"

Cut to the core, with immense hurt dignity, Waley said sorrowfully: "Ah, Krotch, Krotch, my old boozing pal! So you turn against me now, do you? It's all the fault of the world. . . . Everyone's against me!"

"Sit down and sup up and shut up!" Krotch reached out a long arm. "You'll fall down in a minute, anyway."

With a graceful swerve that ended up with a slide and a perilous collision with a table ten yards away, Waley avoided the arm. "I know my r-rights! I'm going to pay a sosh-social call on the princess."

Krotch groaned, emptied his stein, and rose like a thundercloud. But Waley tripped—tripped—out the door, wandering in the general direction of the palace. Flinging down dakkos, Krotch followed, breathing hard through his nose.

Waley stopped to pat an orange robot gardener on its carapace. "And how, my jolly little husbandman, are you this bright and joyful day?"

The gardener clicked some gears, swished a rake at Waley's ankles. He moved back, shoulders surprised, wagging a forefinger. "Naughty, naughty! I'll drain your gears of oil."

He moved behind a clump of pale-green feathery trees and Krotch lost him. Waley staggered on along the gravel path, negotiated a wall with consummate cunning and ease, although, for some odd reason, he found himself lying on the flat of his back on the other side, and sighted on the

nearest palace window. Sunlight burned back from the pane and he blinked. His eyes had gone funny. He could see beautifully clearly directly in front; but the edges of sight blurred so that he appeared to be looking down a spotlighted tunnel. A trick of the light, of course. . . .

Blade about the galaxy Jack Waley might talk the Kerimatic perfectly with impeccable accent; he might look perfectly the part of a Frontiersman tailor; but he had not yet perfectly mastered the art of walking with a sword dangling about his legs.

He could still fall down perfectly. He did so. The sword thrust up between his entangled legs, grinning. He slapped it down in a huff. Where was his dignity now? For some reason the seat of his pants felt wet. An exploring hand discovered muddy water, a bent plant, the rim of a stone jar. Now why should he be sitting in a plant pot? His knees joggled under his chin as he tried to rise and he sank back further.

He could see a stone balustrade, a flagged path, bright flowers forming a screen. On the open space before him, just visible through the flowery screen, an orange mechanical gardener lay in pieces, shining gears stripped and wiring coiled to the sunshine.

"I warned you," said Waley solemnly. "You can't say I didn't warn you. Sher—serves you right! Lollygagging piece of machinery having the effonr—effronton—nerve to rake at me!"

He sat where he was, the water not unpleasant, ruminating. What was he doing right now, anyway?

Jarfon of Trewes strode out onto the flagged court, smiling politely, dressed with subdued magnificence. Two or three other men and a couple of women followed him, all a blur of bright clothes and animated hands and glitter of jewels to Waley. He sat and ruminated.

Speaking in his beautifully modulated Kerimatic, Jarfon of Trewes said: "It is really very good of you to repair the gardeners. No one has been able to do anything with them for longer than anyone can remember. They are all that are left from the old mechanical days."

A voice answered from the man bending over the garden-er, a voice thick and stumbling over the Kerimatic.

"It's a pleasure, Jarfon. Nice to have something for the hands to do."

Then—then Waley disbelieved. He unglued his eyes and tried to focus. Everything whorled chiaroscuro bright. Fingers tore at his brain. His insides bubbled. His ears flapped. His mouth hung. His nose dribbled. His fingers scrabbled at stone, and tore.

Devils or angels, true or false, drunk or sober?

A girl's voice said: "What the hell are you piddling about with that orange zombie for when we need an inter-stellar transceiver?"

And the man: "There's nothing to make even an elementary transceiver from and you damn well know it, Maisiel! Now get off your butt and hand me that wrench."

Kerimatic? Oh, no . . . No, no, no! They spoke in the good old pidgin-English gal-linga. They spoke as people spoke who traveled between the stars spurning muddy balls of planets with toes of fire. They spoke of home.

Waley wanted to scream out in joyous welcome. He wanted to rise from his engulfing flowerpot, dash the blossoms away from his face, embrace them all in his welcoming arms. All he could do—for some strange reason—was wiggle his toes and fingers and plop with his mouth.

The girl said: "Here you are."

The man said: "I know what I'd like to do with this! Oh, I know, I know! Condemned to death, that's what we are! Cast like worms to die on this stinking planet—cut off from home and everything that makes home worth while—the games and whisky, the laughter, the—"

Another man's voice, hard and yet querulous: "Why don't you shut your cretinous mouth and do the job? We all know whose fault it is; but your whining won't make any difference." A hard breath. "We're stuck down on this god-forsaken planet and that's that!"

Again Waley tried to heave himself out of the clutch of the glue flowerpot. Again he merely twitched and slobbered.

The first man said: "If I had him here I'd push this

wrench so far up his bracket I'd unscrew his backbone, so help me!"

The girl said: "He was just a stupid jackanapes. But he's condemned us all to death."

The man said: "I'd like to put this wrench around his gizzard and turn it until his head came off!"

Jack Waley did not try to lever himself from the flowerpot. He stayed where he was and hoped the blossom would not fall from the branch before his face.

He was very wet.

Undone Jack Waley.

The man said: "I'd like to degut, debrain, de everything . . ." He went on at length, banging and clattering the wrench against the gardener. Waley shut his eyes and tried not to hear.

XII

"SO DIE ALL brave men," said Waley when Krotch at last found him. "Stuck by their bottoms in a flower pot."

"You've been studying the underside of the table, all right." Krotch braced a foot against the stone and prepared to haul Waley suckingly out.

"Have they gone?" Waley asked, rolling his eyes.

"Who?"

"Those weirdies who were on the court with a gardener."

"The gardener is still here. Looks as though someone has taken a battleaxe to it. Apart from that—nothing."

"In that case," said revived Jack Waley, "heave away."

With a noise like a giant slurping soup Jack Waley bade a fond farewell to his flower pot. He and Krotch set off smartly back across the gardens, their course reasonably steady, en route for the Fraternity Hall dormitory.

"Have you really seen them, then?" asked Krotch, showing interest. He kept one manacle-like hand around Waley's left bicep, like a sea anchor in a gale.

"Who?"

"Why, you zipsaloozer, those weirdies you asked me about."

"Oh, them." Waley puffed and blowed a bit. Then: "Sure, I saw them. Why?"

"What were they like?" Krotch turned an avid eye.

"People. I was—uh—rather studying the underside of the table, at the time."

"I can smell that. People. By all I hear around the taverns they're all crazy—can't speak properly; gibber at one another; talk the most outlandish nonsense—"

"Such as?"

Krotch lowered his voice and looked about, before saying: "Fellow Frontiersman was saying that they said we lived on a ball! Didn't say why we don't fall off—that sort never do."

"Naturally."

"Claimed they lived on the stars! I didn't believe half my friend told me—he's a bit of a lollygagger on the side—but I've heard it corroborated. That gang are the most unwashed lot of nik-naks this side of the Laurenchan Gate."

"Unwashed nik-naks," Waley said with relish. "I really think Maisie deserves that."

"Who?"

"A friend. At least"—Waley guffawed and but for the sea anchor would have rubbed noses with the pavement—"as friends go, she went; unfortunately, she came back." Then he realized, albeit foggily and with some moral difficulty, just what he was saying. Hell! He ought to be glad, jumping for joy, beside himself with elation, that some of the old *Bucentaure* crowd had been saved. He ought to feel humble gratitude that some of that pitiful shipload of doomed souls had managed to softland here on-planet and find a haven with the Princess Kerith of Brianon, he ought, he ought . . .

Captain Rattray, Diana Darkster, control room personnel, the fat widow from Solvenus, Maisie D'Angelo—and—and—the chief engineer!—some had been spared.

Damn the chief engineer and his murdering wrench.

Poor Jack Waley.

"Hullo, Chief," he'd say all bright and jolly. "How nice you weren't all killed in space. How nice to see you all."

And—"Hullo, Jack Waley!" And: "Nice to see you again, Jack Waley!" And: "Come here, Jack Waley."

And darkness.

Poor, miserable, least-of-men Jack Waley.

Then Krotch boomed, his tea-brown voice solid and real in the Frontiersmen's Fraternal Hall. "A quick feather of the lollygagging Predakker and you'll be as right as nine dakkos, me old lapsaloozer!"

Of course.

Stupid Jack Waley.

Dear old Krotch, with his hair and his furs so overlapping you didn't know where each left off, with his shiny memento scars, with his pragmatic observance of human life and values; dear old Krotch, who staked himself out as a Predakker-meat snare and could then hold you up so gently, so concerned—and breathe great fuming spouts of lollygagging Phyrae ruby all over you—old Krotch. Drubal had been half his emotion on this planet and Krotch the other; one, calm and helpful and a father mentor; the other, wild and free and a laughing boisterous drinking comrade, who would stand beside you as the battle raged. Of Mimi he would not think, for the incompatibility of their genes made of this world's predicament a shameful mockery.

Why should he worry about the chief engineer and his wrench? One thing appeared sure; no one was leaving Kerim.

By this time Waley knew enough to know why the Kerim called themselves the Homeless Ones. The answer was so obvious and so tartly lonely he recognized with humility that he must have grown perhaps enough to recognize his own futility—but of that no one man can ever be sure.

Oh—independent Jack Waley.

He suddenly realized what the world of the Kerim, what Drubal and Krotch, had given him. What had the Solterranean culture between the stars given him? On what scale of values could he fix the rates? All the wonders of automation, of nuclear physics, of plastic perfections, of cybernetic sycophants, of financial fiddlings, all these undoubted

marvels had given him a suit of clothes to his back, a generally near-enough-satisfied belly—not always—literature, tri-di shows, free transportation, medicines to ease city-bred malaises, a feeling of being part of a great expanding interstellar culture, a life with a future.

Kerim had given him slavery, Predakkers, Whispering Wizards, the inability to father sons and daughters.

Kerim had given him Drubal and Krotch—and, if he was sensible—Mimi.

No, there was no scale of values to fix the rates.

But in that moment of awed understanding Jack Waley knew where he belonged.

He had been lucky—good old Lucky Jack Waley—not everyone has the chance of finding another beginning to life. All one can do is go on, as best one can, clawing and scrabbling at the ruts in life's path, with bleeding knees and broken hands; go on and go on, for to slip back is worse than the death at the end of the path.

He had been lucky to stumble upon a new beginning. . . .

And then he thought of the curse of Kerim, and he saw his mistake and his selfishness, for here was no true beginning, no beginning that, for him alone, could be shared with everyone else. A private beginning is only a part of a whole people's forward movement—and these people of the Kerim were not moving forward; they had reached a point, a hole in the path, and were dropping through and, soon, when the last white whisker drooped and the last wheezy breath had been rattled, they would all be gone. How, then, Lucky Jack Waley, a new beginning?

Two days later the alarm sirens shrilled and, as the people of Brianon scattered for cover, Krotch took Waley on his first official Predakker-hunt.

They rode out caparisoned in their Frontiersmen's finery, arbalests ready, laughing and joking and singing the ribald songs Krotch had taught Waley.

Six men, with Waley and another tailer, the little band rode past the last triumphal arch—now decorously swathed in black ribands—and struck the cultivated lands, their horses picking a finicky way between the furrows.

They returned, three days later, with one man riding

with his arm in a sling, his face oatmeal gray; the trailer belly-down on his horse, arms and legs tied underneath, never to ride forth again; and with five Predakkers grappled and messily dead in bundles swinging in nostril-snorting-horse-fear at their saddle bows.

"A good enough start, Jack, me old lad," said Krotch, not looking at the other trailer. "I think Muzzerin will pass you into the Guild now."

Muzzerin, grayer and older than Krotch but bearing the same unmistakable stamp of the professional Predakker-killer and frontiersman, agreed. He headed the Guild now. Soon, so common rumor said, his place would fall vacant and then it would be between Najid and Krotch.

Of Najid, a man with a bulbous nose and near eyes, a cruel mouth and the ability to smile and curse on a breath and mean only the curse, Waley steered very clear. Najid's vowed ambition was to head the Guild. To Krotch that seemed a jovial task and he did not mask his contempt for the mean-faced position-seeker. Waley worried over that.

Walking the streets of the city Brianon, Waley missed the vicarious enjoyments of window-shopping, an exercise much beloved of penniless yearners after the good life.

Just about the only items of merchandise preds and green-skins would buy were food, livestock and service. Of what need shops when all one needed could be obtained from Pe'Ichen? Waley had not, in the nature of his experiences, delved very deeply into the economic setup of Brianon; but quite obviously even a man of his limited financial understanding could grasp that money had limited value; it was essential but in a delimited area. The use of the creative powers of Pe'Ichen had long ago reached stability and people now merely asked for what they wanted, received it with good grace, used it as indicated, and asked for more. To them that was just the same as going shopping.

When Jack Waley was at last officially inducted into the Guild of Frontiersmen, he experienced a genuine feeling of emotion, a gratitude, a determined resolve, a desire to make himself worthy of Brianon, the Guild and the Princess Kerith. He walked down the steps and for a cynical instant saw himself bloated in incompetence, a sniveling innocent

prating of loyalty to a probably decadent aristocracy; he who came of an interstellar culture and had been whipped, treading. The ebony mood passed and a nacreous euphoria supervened—he went out with Krotch and drank and sang uproariously. “Oh, we’ll pred a dak and we’ll dak a pred”—but he did not, this time, drink enough to study the underside of the table.

A week later the great pilgrimage began.

The concourse of the people waiting to speed on her perilous pilgrimage their lady queen-princess was little larger than the pilgrimage-procession itself. Squads of flamens, troops of horses, battalions of soldiers, flocks of handmaidens, carts, carriages, pack animals, and, for all anyone knew, tumbrils, jostled along in a floury smoke of axle-bending progress. The rutted roads struck shrewdly at the ankles and feet of the pilgrims, like life, demanding more than could easily be forgiven.

Krotch came looking for Waley breathing fire and lolly-gagging slaughter.

For Jack Waley was At It Again.

He defended himself by the pious reflection that this made his first chance since that harpie liparoo Coral had inveigled him with a broken bodice into Mister Whippy’s hands. The upper room of the Purple Pillory lay swathed in rose-pink circumspection; the bed had been turned back, and empty glasses that had once held the silvery-golden beverage of golden Phyrae cried to be refilled—afterwards.

The girl—her name, Waley thought, was Arlais, or something like that—simpered coyly, hands spread, mouth inviting. She was the serving wench here and very eager. But Jack Waley was more eager; so eager that he tore his clothes uncaring, knowing more to be readily obtainable at the department store run by Pe’Ichen.

“Ah, my stellar poppy!” he said, advancing on her with wide arms, a wide grin and little else.

“Ooh!” she said, a most intelligent observation in the circumstances.

She lay back on the bed—her clothes seemed in some miraculous way to have dissipated—and held out her arms.

Waley took a tremendous breath, feeling himself a man, and started to launch himself down—

A thunderous, unrepentant, crude knocking on the door.

A voice, lewd, lecherous, cruel: "Hey! You lollygagging scuttle-butted slopbucket! Hey, Jack Waley! D'you want me to scouse you for a zipsoppering schoots?"

Waley held off. He shriveled. He said, softly: "Oh, no. This is not true."

"Go away!" he screamed in fury. "I'm busy!"

"I'll break this lollygagging door down!" Hinges creaked. "Everyone's moving off. You'll be late for parade!"

"I want to be late! I've matters in hand!"

"Then drop the matters! There's plenty more where they came from, you lo. . . ng, sc. . . ed, schoots!"

"And dots to you, too! Get lost!"

Arlais, if that was her name, screamed and tried to cover three items with two hands. For the door bulged. White splintered wood showed like new teeth around the hinges. The bolt snicked and snapped. The door dissolved.

Krotch, bearded and furred, booted and sworded, armored and arbalested, towered like a smoke-conjured genie, furious and ferocious and fearsome—Krotch, his friend.

"You—" said Waley.

"Out, girl," growled Krotch and swung and connected a giant hand on one buttock, the imprint glowing like molten metal.

"I've never—" Arlais, if that was her name, sobbed.

"You will, my girl, you will!"

Krotch Pe'Ichened clothes. "Dress, you slob. Dress and attend on parade, for the Princess Kerith departs on the great pilgrimagel"

"She could have waited another fifteen minutes," Waley complained. "I'd have been quick."

Riding out submerged in the tail of the great procession Waley ticked off his misfortunes. He never did get there. Poor Old Jack Waley. Always robbed at the post.

Golden sunset lacquered the seven Mountains of Manicoro. Soon snow would creep back to six of those seven peaks. The season was well advanced for a journey.

The first night out the hullabaloo in pitching camp, the

gilded pavilions, the flags and banners, the braziers, the smoking haunches, the flagons of wine—all made Waley's head ache and, grumpily, he bade Krotch an uncivil good night and rolled himself in his cloak.

The next morning the flamens brigade, after accompanying the royal pilgrimage for a few miles, bowed, scraped, made official gestures, and retired back to the city.

The adventurous crowds of ladies and gallants retired in the afternoon, the ochre brick road asmoother with their carriages, home for the evening.

"That's a little better," Krotch grunted. "Breathe a little easier now."

Next day more well-wishers left the pilgrimage, this time escorted by a troop of cavalry and a battalion of soldiers.

"We're pruning down to size," Krotch said with satisfaction.

They passed the Valley of Unrequited Love, where the marble statues of the sundered lovers, stained and partly covered by stychaphons, appealed in eternal passion to the empty sky. Then they wended the Loverbeek Trail, where stones cut the feet and fell, rattling, a thousand feet into emptiness. After that, without pause, they crossed Perfidon Moor, not stopping to pitch camp until they reached the far side and the dubious comfort of Far Wood.

Here, when they had pitched camp and gathered wood and lit roaring bonfires for their cooking, Muzzerin was summoned, along with the colonels of the soldiers, to the tent of Jarfon of Trewes.

Krotch watched Muzzerin walk toward the tent. In his face an expression caused Waley to say: "He's a grand old man, Muzzerin."

"That he is. He should never have come on this little jaunt, he shouldn't. We've brought beds and folderols, enough food for half Phyrae, tents and cooking pots, armor and equipment for an army, and we had to drag that good old man with us." Krotch jabbed a stick into the fire, brooding. "No one knows where we're going, not even Jarfon, not even the Princess, bless her blue eyes. To find Pe'Ichen, is all they'll say. I think it's all the doing of those weirdies the Princess took in, and that's an opinion shared by many."

Waley knew the talk of the camp. "If that is so, why didn't these strangers come with us?" As he spoke he thought of Captain Rattray and the chief engineer and the other Terrans as strangers.

"Huh! As to that, look to their lollygagging guts."

"The schoots," Waley added, fraternally.

"I'll tell you one thing, though." Waley withdrew his stick and tested the kebab. "I wouldn't have thought they'd have brought along all the gear they have. I mean—tents and beds and whatnots. Why don't we ask Pe'Ichen to create what we need for us when we need it?" He stopped then at the expression on Krotch's face, a wry, amused, astonished, angry look. Waley wondered, as he so often did, if he had bungled it again. Life on an alien planet was beset with pitfalls.

"I'll tell you why, Jack, you who've come straight from the green wood still wet behind the ears. You probably managed there sensibly. But here, oh, no!" He breathed deeply, blew on his meat that hissed and spat. "Here we have Conspicuous Effort. Those fine fancy ladies and gentlemen, those fine fancy officers, those fine fancy wise men, all could trot along easily and gently on their horses and create what they wanted at march's end. But, not them, the lollygagging . . . Well—they define wealth by Conspicuous Service. If it's harder to do it this way, they'll do it this way, and let Pe'Ichen wait and rust before they'll ask him for anything."

"Priamber Mismic, wasn't it, back in Meroe?"

"Yes. It raises their prestige if they pay for things instead of creating them, if they drag their lumberware about with them instead of creating it when needed."

"A man could get rich that way—" he began, and then saw the absurdity of that. Riches, here, as he had seen first off, lay in service and comradeship—with love, food and drink as essential extras. Wealth varied in meaning with various cultures. The Princess Kerith was the most wealthy person in Brianon, even though she might have only one dakko or greeno in her purse, for everyone loved and served her. There could be no greater fortune than that.

He looked again and with fresh eyes at Krotch. Krotch, to

Jack Waley, was great wealth. Oh, certainly he represented wealth to Krotch, too. But the relative values of each to the other favored Waley. Good old Krotch. Lucky Jack Waley.

Come to think of it, as a basis for a system of economics, it stood the most basic tests. He remembered his own interstellar culture of Conspicuous Consumption, of Conspicuous Waste; of vicious struggles for promotion, of stabs in the back, of smiling faces spreading lying gossip designed to drag you down the economic precipice; of cringing subservience in face of unemployment. Yes, the fair land of Kerim had much, despite indentures and Whispering Wizards, to soothe and shame a man of the galaxy.

But then—the galaxy didn't have a Pe'Ichen.

Or—did it? Wasn't the genius of science perfectly capable of producing everything that Pe'Ichen produced, albeit in a different way? Couldn't the bounty of the galaxy, the fertile fruits of the Earth, be part of every man's natural inheritance? Only the stupidly blind and insensate scheming heart of man had turned the Earth into a mess of unhappy, neurotic, squabbling place-seekers.

Then he laughed in silent self-mockery. Earth's interstellar explorations were opening up more than the galaxy, they were forcing mankind to realize its own shortcomings and correct them before time ran out. Here in Brianon a good system was being perverted by fancifuls who desired Conspicuous Effort to show how much better they were than anyone else. . . . Mankind, it seemed, Terran or alien, always took the most blasted perverted way it could of making a life.

No information of their destination came down the line to Waley and, the next day as they passed through Far Wood and entered on an expanse of short wire grass, flat and featureless to the horizon, he rode slumped forward, thinking many strange thoughts about his dual life.

"The Plain of Broken Promises," Krotch said, grumpily, as they jogged on. "And we're trundling all this rubbish with us."

"Why that name?"

"If you do not carry enough water with you, promises of eternal friendship tend to be broken."

"I follow," said Waley, with a shudder.

Their water lasted and, with the slow rise of mountain peaks ahead, the freshening of the air betokened rushing springs and spuming streams. Trees clumped here and there, and then—blessedly—a river to cross and so up and into the Narragut Gorge, the only passageway practicable through the purple Mountains of Forgetfulness.

"Why?" said Krotch, chuckling. "You'll soon see. Look."

They broke through the shoulder of the gorge, chilly now and with cloaks and blankets stiffly fluttering, looked down. Ahead to the end of the world stretched a vast chaos of wilderness, trees, glinting streams, chasms, rocks, the face of the earth as though tortured in times past wearing now a dazed, cracked, frantic garb of madness.

"Out there—the wild land of Ma'ad Kratern. This is the end of Brianon. And here, if I'm not mistaken, are Salop and old Furze. Hey there, you zipstoppering Predakker-handlers! Seen any da'angs lately?"

The two Frontiersmen thus addressed turned sharply, saw Krotch, and leaped on him. Waley's hand jerked to a standstill above his sword hilt as he saw the back-slapping, the wild greetings as Krotch dismounted. The two men had something of the fey quality of that landscape out there, a wide smiling blankness behind their eyes, as though the landscape had penetrated their brains and made them willing dupes. Waley found the same unsettling quality in the rest of the Frontiersmen garrison here in the Narragut Gorge on the border of Brianon.

So that's why they're called Frontiersmen, he reasoned, feeling foolish he had not understood before.

"The Princess—here—out on the frontier!" The garrison turned out awed and then inspired. Fires blossomed, meat sizzled, songs were sung and drink consumed in an orgy of celebration.

Krotch dragged Waley to a fire, sat down with old Furze, and Salop, talking over old times, bubbling with the contagious excitement of the moment, conscious of the perilous mission of the morrow.

Waley glimpsed the Princess being smilingly escorted by officers toward the gray rock keep jutting from one flank

of the gorge, brands alight already and casting their shadows long and dark against the chill rocks. She smiled with gracious ease, a rose among nettles, and yet Waley saw in her calm face a clear shadow of strain. She was tired already, and the journey only just beginning.

"Our princess' eyes are blue-oh!

Our sweet princess' eyes are blue!"

All about in the night as the men ate and drank and slept the sound of armor and the chingle of horse equipment, the sizzle of the fires and the dripping fat, the snores, the gurglings of wine, the belches, the loud voices, the arguments—the occasional flat smack of a blow—the voices of the gamesters, gambling before the very gates of hell, all interlarded with snatches of song, obtruded with a sick fantasy into Waley's mind. What was he, a crushed suburbanite, doing here, rollicking at the edge of the known world with these ruffians and their Princess?

The shudder of horses, the impatient stamp of hooves, the smell of frying macne, brought Waley to consciousness the next morning, stiff, with the rime butter-thick on his cloak. He yawned. Krotch dug him in the ribs.

"We're off on the beginning today, Jack! All the boys are sorted from the men today!"

"Let me be—" Jack Waley said, and then halted his betraying tongue. Let him be a boy? As a joke it wasn't funny—and, what was more, he didn't mean it. He wanted to go. "Let me be at my macne," he amended, thrusting up out of his blankets and cloak, sending white rime spuming.

The soldiers still accompanying the expedition, having covered most of the miles aboard troop transporter carts, must now either walk or ride horses. The Princess Kerith swept quickly down the gray stone steps of the fortress, her azure gown half hidden by her great bellachrontis-blue cloak, gem-studded, high of collar and sweeping of hem. She drew on her long gloves as she stepped rapidly toward her horse, a white charger from which the stuff of legends are made. Steam jetted coiling and ice-white from the horse's nostrils. Steel shod feet clamored on the flags. Amid a bustle of occupied varlets, the stiff punctilio of officers, the flutter of handmaidens mounting up, the royal proces-

sion moved slowly from the court, out onto the open steeps of the Narragut Gorge. Everyone cheered.

Even Jack Waley. Especially Jack Waley.

He felt he had a special right to cheer. How many of these devoted men cheering around him now had personally saved the life of their princess? Huh? Just how many?

She rode past Waley and Krotch. Her pale face, the eyelids half-drooped, the mouth stretched into a diffident, official smile, the cheeks rounded and each with a single livid drop of color as though each was the breast of the thorn-pierced nightingale, passed with the swaying jig-jog of her mount's sure-footed progress. Remote, unapproachable, a maiden fair from a fable, she drew up to herself the cheers and the devotion of these rough impious men. Like a banner carried before the eve of battle she passed before her faithful.

Then, with a single curt twitch of the reins she set her mount downwards, down onto the far side of the Narragut Gorge, down and out onto the mindless chaos of Ma'ad Kratern.

"Why," said Waley fretfully, riding down beside Krotch in their place in the cavalcade, "does she have to go herself? Why risk her blue eyes?"

"The wise men have decreed it so. Although I did hear Jarfon of Trewes was against the idea. He said if the queen-princess could not rely on her people to do all that could be done for her, then what was the use in trying at all?"

"There's sense in that." Waley jounced in his seat, too deflated to feel the excitement of the departure, as his horse picked its way between rocks and boulders down onto the mad plain.

"Look at old Sufferin, there." Suffering, was Sufferin the wise man, his gray head bare, his angular bony body swaying and jerking uncomfortably to his horse's gait, his rear, Waley guessed, already sore from this morning's ride after the preceding days aboard a carriage. "He was the prime instigator of the idea that the princess, bless all of her, should lead the expedition. Right and fitting in the eyes

of the Lord he said, as though the Lord was concerned with what Pe'Ichen ever did."

Waley found occasion to check his gear, not wishing to be drawn into the rare comments on these people's religion. The Lord whom Krotch talked about was in all probability not the same One that Drubal had mentioned. Not having children to teach seemed to have blunted the outgoing half of the Kerimatic religion. But if it was tied up with making the Princess Kerith ride this hell hole, then Waley, although having no time for it, could see the ancient parallels with the religions with which he was familiar.

Spare horses trailed the cavalcade and a dozen times during the morning fresh mounts had to be fetched from the remuda to replace those who had fallen. The going told on men and beasts alike. As they advanced further and further into the wastelands the heat grew until soon Waley, like everyone else, was soaked in sweat.

On the morning of the third day of that dreary ride, baggage, duplicate armor, tents, beds, pots and pans, all--all were left behind piled into a fantastic jumble like a mountain of merchandise waiting for phantom buyers.

"Now we can move," Krotch said; and his words carried the grimness of a savage satisfaction indulged in to his shame.

For as long as it remained in sight Waley kept turning to look back at that weird pile of relics. Useless appendages now abandoned and left to the mercy of the mad plain, they seemed to him then also to say that all correspondence with the life he had known had been sundered.

Waley had never been one to make much of symbols; any fool can make anything he likes out of any symbol; but he had to shiver a little then.

That night as they pitched camp the name of Pe'Ichen fluttered around in an orgasm of creation. Waley, wishing not to draw attention to himself, Pe'Ichened away aloud. Around the fires of Jarfon of Trewees and a few others of the nobles and the wise men a silence accompanied creation.

As they left their second pile of relics behind the next morning Waley again looked back, seeing once more the symbols. This whole journey, really, could be taken as a

symbol, if you felt like it. Lots of clever-clever people would do so, reading into anything at all what they wanted to impress other people with, not caring how distorted their reasoning might be, caring only for the self-aggrandizement of arcane knowledge.

Waley laughed, hitched up his sword, and rode on across the mad plain, Krotch singing at his side.

*"We've zipped many a stop and we've stopped many
a zip,
We've predakkered a pred to its dak,
Our princess' eyes are blue-oh,
Our sweet princess' eyes are blue!"*

From the spawning fastnesses of the Ma'ad Kratern came da'angs to prowl the cavalcade, screeching and yowling, slimily creeping nearer, spuming their filth and trying with bestial cunning to cut off stragglers. Najid and a group of experienced Frontiersmen rode out fully armored in the particular equipment needed to hunt da'angs, repulsed the horrors and returned with bloodied lances. They brought back no mementoes, no skins. Da'angs when dead were consigned to cleansing flame. Currency from any part of a da'ang sickened.

"That's a tough business, Krotch," Waley observed, a little greenish around the jaw.

"Oh, Najid's a good da'ang hunter, there's no denying." Krotch spoke casually. "That's why we always have a guard on the Narragut Gorge. Can't have da'angs slinking through into Brianon."

"Gulp," said Jack Waley. "I thought I was growing tough—but that idea frightens me down to my saddlebone."

Seven days of columned marching surrounded by isolation brought the pilgrimage through the Ma'ad Kratern. They stumbled through the last crazy landscape out onto a wide prospect of plain and hill, river and dale, not believing they had finished with a tortured land's inner struggle with them, gasping for a lighter air.

"Beyond the Ma'ad Kratern," said Krotch, heavily, reining

in and watching with all the others the long rolling many-humped waves of herds of horses vast beyond belief crossing the plains, "lie the unknown lands."

"No one's been here before, then?"

"Oh, yes, exploring parties. There are even maps, of a sort, and I don't doubt Jarfon of Trewes has such a thing up there to guide him now. But no one really *knows*. We call this plain the Plain of Horses. After that we'll have to invent our own names—it's all the same. We're going so far from Brianon we'll never—"

Krotch jerked himself upright, blowing out his beard, hard-faced. "Come on, Jack. We're starting again."

Jack Waley didn't like this turn in his comrade's mien.

Endlessly they rode across the plain. Endlessly they followed the shore of a curving sea where strange birds screamed and stared at them wisely with jewel-bright eyes. Endlessly they rode across hilltop and dale, following the lay of the land, a thin column of men and a few women endlessly following a mindless destiny.

One endless morning scouts rode back to report signs of a road, footmarks, wheeled traffic, the smell of smoke in the air.

Waley with Krotch and a group of Frontiersmen were assigned point. With no little trepidation, Waley followed his brothers-in-arms out. When, from the rise of an eminence, they saw the city, he felt his bowels constrict.

"We'll play this very cautiously," Krotch rumbled.

But the city lay deserted under the bright sun.

Charred wood, soot-blackened brick, toppled stone, splintered glass, the city cried aloud of wreckage and sack, looting and burning. Lined up in neat and orderly rows stood stakes, ten feet tall, stripped, polished wood, lovingly prepared, in rows of two; two by two, stretching along the main avenues. The fruit hanging on those stakes retched the stomachs of the tough Frontiersmen. Skeletons, thankfully, most of them; but as they rode nearer the newer stakes they saw decomposing human bodies, and then, at the end . . . men and women, paired, hanging from their stakes, tortured, dealt with as no human body had any right or reason to expect, dealt with in such fashion that the

sight became an obscene curse on every living thing of this land, reproachful, shameful and, finally, meaningless.

Krotch sent back orders for the pilgrimage to ride around this blighted city and its hideous crop.

Days later it fell to the lot of Krotch again to reconnoiter a city. Red brick, glass towers, stone palaces, the conglomeration of houses rose pleasantly from the cliffs along the shoreline, with the sea booming comfortably in the background. Waley did not accompany Krotch and, when his comrade returned to camp, plied him with questions.

But Krotch looked ill-at-ease, gray-faced, taciturn.

Waley learned from various sources—old Furze, glazed of eye—the lamentable horror of that city. For twenty years no child had been born and this, said the frenzied citizens, must be because the faces of their god had turned from them. To appease him they sent him sacrifices—sacrifice after sacrifice. Men and women, paired, offered up in ghastly hecatombs of destruction, stake upon stake, an abundance, a proliferation, an outpouring of human life upon the altar of human life. The scouts had seen.

Waley experienced relief he had not been present.

That night the camp suffered an attack. Small wiry yellow men with spindly legs and bulbous bodies, with Aztec lips and grinning idiot faces, leaping the flames and screaming death, attacking and attacking with no other thought than mutual destruction. Waley fought in the grip of an agonized horror. Through the sleeting bedlam with flames leaping, arrows sheeting, quarrels whickering, the men of Brianon fought the yellow devils and drew clear and retreated in a vengeful square, their Princess at the center, hacking their way out from the city of devils and its acolytes.

Reduced in numbers they marched on and took a long, austere and weary trail inland to avoid the remaining two cities on that devilish coast.

Mountains lofted ahead. Snow glimmered a spectral welcome from their summits, beckoning them from the stultifying heat of the plain by the sea. They climbed.

Jarfon of Trewes galloped one fine morning of crisp breathable air down the attenuated column, a fluttering scrap

of parchment at his saddle, his eyes raking up toward the pass ahead, his horse snorting and head-turning in the communicated eagerness of his rider.

"Looks as though we might have arrived somewhere." Krotch regained his usual damn-your-eyes manner on the promise of an end to this weary journey. The horses' pace quickened. Waley, trying to discover within himself the reason for this pilgrimage as a distinct end, apart from the avowed intent of wringing the truth of barrenness from Pe'Ichen, felt a flowering of passion. Perhaps, now, he might find the reasons for what had happened to him.

A waterfall spumed down black rock faces, lichen-greened and grained with mosaics of algae; a fine mist of silver spun like permanent never-still spiders' webs over the gorge where thunder rose clamorously above the swift threading of waters. The cavalcade halted.

Streaming never-endingly cragged cloud castles cascaded across the sky.

On such a morning as this Adam must have awoken, rubbing his side, to find the sleeping Eve cushioned in her hair. Perhaps, this morning, this very day, the men of this alien world would discover why Eve no longer fruited.

Dismounting at a word from Jarfon of Trewes, Krotch led a small party up the blank crags beside the waterfall, springing from boulder to boulder and from lip to lip with an eagerness not seen this side of the Narragut Gorge.

At the top they paused. Embowered in vines and creepers with trees forcing the gray walls outward, a tumbled building still stood three cornered and strangely forlorn. In the shape of a tall and narrow truncated pyramid the building hovered over the crags and the waterfall, the silvery mist and the waters' roar.

And Waley remembered.

He remembered Drubal in the green wood and his slow grave voice reluctantly expounding the mysteries of the past, of the silver spire above a place of black boulders and silver feathers, of gargantuan thunders and a never-dying mist.

"Why," said Jack Waley, "this must be the home of the Guardian."

"What know you of the Guardian?" demanded Jarfon of Trewes, unexpectedly at Waley's shoulder.

"Only that he has some special relationship with Pe'Ichen." Waley made a small dismissing gesture. "But it would seem we are too late. His silver spire has crumbled to the dust and no one has lived here for years."

"This was our chief hope." The minister of state rubbed a weary hand over his face and Waley sensed the deep sorrow abiding in this man, forced to guide and counsel a young girl in the graceful destruction of her world. "From the Guardian we sought the way to Pe'Ichen—"

And—for the first time—Jack Waley realized how frightened these people of Kerim were of Pe'Ichen, how appalled they were at their own effrontery in seeking him.

"We have marched a long and weary way," rumbled Krotch, and he sat down like an old man.

"The world is coming to an end," whispered Jarfon of Trewes. "And there is no help for us." He looked at Waley without seeing him. "Now I must go down and tell the Princess Kerith there is no hope left."

XIII

THE RUINS FASCINATED WALEY.

"The Guardian," Drubal had said back there in the green wood, "could ask and receive from Pe'Ichen wonders beyond our comprehension." Any fanciful notions that the silver triangular spire could be a spaceship had been instantly dissipated at first glimpse of that gray stone building, its truncated top lying three quarters hidden in the droppings of the trees. Waley walked ahead, feet crunching leaves, his shadow short and squat before him. Every day of their journey his shadow had shrunk. Southwards, then, they had been traveling—or northwards, if his lifecraft had deposited him in the southern hemisphere of the planet. He didn't know.

The sad umber mood of the cavalcade touched Waley with a feather of annoyance. He retained enough of the conventional Earthman to be able to say: "We're not beaten yet. Come on!" The words rang hollow with cruel mockery.

Sufferin, the wise man, helped by strong frontiersmen's arms, was hoisted and pushed to the top of the ascent. He stood with Jarfon of Trewes looking on the wrecking of all their hopes.

"We have found the place," he said in his pierced-bellows croak. "But we are a thousand years too late."

Larne of Red Jafare, hollow of eye and bitter of mouth, sunken in the rigors of the journey and all his finery drab and tawdry in the sunlight, sucked in his cheeks and said nothing.

Jack Waley ducked into the doorless opening, vine-smothered, smelling of bats and dank plants and vitiated air. Heavily, unwillingly, Krotch followed, breathing laboriously.

Time had leaned on this place.

Compressed angularity of well and cornice, three-sided, simple, essential, hollowed out to form a chamber within the spire; dry dust drifted in through the opening in century-long ripples; dust choked machines and control panels; dust clothed the austere mindless forms of science with the gentler meaningless forms of art; the air sucked hard and bitter with the flat dead taste of the unremembered long ago.

"I do not like this place." Krotch bowed his head to dart his eyes about like swallows in autumn. Back creaked the echoes—"place-ace-ace . . ."

The voices boomed and then echoed back in weary counterpoint, stirring the heavy air, painfully, like a crone's fingers pitifully turning a spindle.

"Long unused." Waley stared about, half recognizing beneath powdered mounds a machine from his earlier life.

"Time has left this place—" Jarfon of Trewes straightened up inside, a lamp held high. Twitterings and scuttlings aloft betokened the habitual absence of light.

Dust finer than the finest rugs clothed the stone floor. Jarfon sneezed as dust puffed. Waley looked about—not un-

derstanding what he was looking for, hurt deep within himself at the apathy of response, dulled and deadened.

"What do you make of this?" Krotch's voice sounded subdued, hushed.

A small round transparent-lidded box, the object trembled in Krotch's hand as he puffed dust. Looking down, Waley could see the pin-mouthed needle trembling, swinging erratically, dancing.

He had not been privileged to observe the navigational equipment aboard *Moonflower*; but he had seen no compasses in use in his travels. He sidled a glance at Jarfon of Trewes. That noble stood looking down blank-faced, baffled, uncomprehending. Then Waley snapped his eyes back to the compass. There might be a mass of iron at hand, or there might still be residual electric currents coiling the room; but he felt sure that the needle did not point north and south; the natural laws of geo-magnetism were not being followed here. The needle pointed stubbornly on an east-west axis. Either the compass was broken or its power waned—or . . . ?

He took it from Krotch's hand and went outside. He jiggled it. Then he squinted along the arrow head's demarcated line. A notch in the hills, a silent wisp of cloud. Slowly, he said: "I think Pe'Ichen wishes us to follow the direction of this arrow. . . ."

No consuming eagerness filled the cavalcade, no great rushing enthusiasm, no ribald song and joyous onrush; silently and forlornly they trailed along following the direction of the arrow, not believing; but having nothing else to attempt, in face of Waley's quiet persuasive confidence content to take this course in preference to doing nothing or of returning home to far Brianon.

"Let me see!" demanded the Princess Kerith imperiously. Waley showed her, conscious of her nearness, the pressure of her thigh astraddle her horse. "Yes," she murmured. "Yes—the arrow must point to some great miracle."

And so once again the pilgrimage set out following the arrow of destiny.

Someone, surely, Jack Waley thought, of all these clever upper-crusty nobility would have had the sense to recognize

the compass's pointing needle as a sign for them to follow? Someone, surely?

Familiarity with mechanical marvels breeds a responsive train of thought that all the education in non-scientific pursuits however profound can never duplicate. The cavalcade jogged on and of them all perhaps only Jack Waley, reluctantly and with amused awe, recognized that he had tipped the balance of the world.

This journey progressed as a grotesque mirror image of their windings from the borders of Brianon. Here they passed devastated cities; here cities peopled by men and women crazed in the last rites of fear and self-immolation; there the unending steppe-lands grazed by herds of monstrous beasts and preyed on by beasts of even more monstrous beastliness. Over river and gorge, mountain and plain, they struggled painfully on.

Krotch took to humming the Song of the Seventy Da'angs beneath his breath, a keening whine of sound like winter beneath a door.

The self-pitying anguish sniffled away at Waley's nerves.

"Wrap it up, Krotch!" he snarled, hunching in the saddle.

"Who the lollygagging scousing zip-zoppering thunders do you think you're talking to, me old shooting Jack?"

But Krotch did not raise his head and there was no relish in his words.

"From far Brianon we have come and off the end of the world we must fall, and not one mother's son of our once-sprightly band will ride home to his hearth and his hall."

The Song of the Seventy Da'angs contained thrice seventy stanzas and Krotch knew every one.

Waley suffered in silence, trying to close his ears to the lament, feeling his own horse's haunches moving in empathic union with the cadences of the dirge.

The column halted in an untidy shuffling of hooves and horses trampling out of line. Krotch lifted his head. Waley said: "Go back to your selfish fears, Krotch. I was wondering—"

Over the galloping thud of approaching hooves, Krotch shouted in his iron voice: "You're my lollygagging comrade,

Jack; but keep your scousing slopbucket of a mouth shut right now, you fly-bottle!"

Larne of Red Jafare hauled up his shivering horse before Krotch. His gray wealed face looked as though mummy wrappings had just been stripped away. His eyes shone unhealthily.

He lashed Krotch full across the face with his crop.

"I've warned you before about your filthy mouth!" he screamed in his woman's voice, high and shrill.

Krotch moved not a muscle. He sat there lumpily on his horse, blocky in the saddle, his great bearded face burning above the fur with the razor slash of the lash a striped indictment from forehead to chin.

Waley fell off his horse.

In falling, shouting with shocked surprise, he grasped Larne of Red Jafare's boot. He twisted as he fell. He pulled Larne out of the saddle, tearing the reins loose. He hit the ground and, strangely, Larne lay beneath him. Blindly, Waley called out for help, shouting that he was being attacked and could not see. He put a boot in Larne's mouth. He stood up staggeringly. He held his hands over his face—not too near his downcast eyes—and lolled about crying that he had been treacherously assaulted. His bootmarks tromped muddily all over Larne of Red Jafare's finery.

Krotch seized his arm, leaning from the saddle, saying loudly so that Jarfon of Trewes, galloping up, heard: "It is all right, Jack! We're not being attacked! It was just a zip-zoppering mistake! Mount up!"

Waley put his boot thoughtfully on the back of Larne's neck where the man had turned over to protect his vitals, and trod down sturdily. He looked up, lowering his hands.

"We were attacked!" he shouted, dramatically appealing directly to Jarfon of Trewes. "Krotch was hit—I was thrown from the saddle—and I caught one of the enemy!"

"Leave him be, Jack." Jarfon of Trewes sat rock-like. He did not dismount. "You are fighting one of our own men."

"I'm never!" said Waley, appalled. He looked down. "Oh!" he said. He reached down a hand, lifted Larne of Red Jafare, stood him up, began with great solicitousness to brush

away the mud. "Look—your poor face—it's all bleeding! I *am* sorry. Oh, dear, your clothes—but Pe'Ichen will fix those Your nose—your mouth—really, this is frightfull! What rotten bad luck!"

Larne of Red Jafare swayed. One eye—the other shut in yellow and green shades of blue—fastened on Waley like the eye of a barracuda. He tried to speak but his bloating lips stiffened before the words would come. He staggered off to his horse and Jarfon of Trewes assisted him away.

Krotch said: "You old Predakker-killer! You could lolly-gag yourself for life!" He spoke softly, so that the two nobles could not hear.

"*That*—and the Princess Kerith," said Waley. "Never!"

"As to that, forget it. The match is ordained." Krotch watched from beneath frowning brows as Waley remounted, stiff-legged, a little awed by the enormity of what he had done. "But—Larne of Red Jafare—you've done it now, boy. He'll never let it rest. As long as you and he live, he'll never forget this day."

"Currency," Waley said, reaction conferring a lightness to his words. "That's what it was, Krotch. The real economic system of this world in operation."

The column backed up a little, horses moving unsteadily from side to side, legs stabbing the ground, then the cavalcade resumed forward march.

"I should never have continued with the Song of the Seventy Da'angs. That's what did it."

"Predakker-meat," said Waley, smiling painfully.

"Wonder what Salome's up to now." Krotch had a far-away look in his eyes. "Dolly would fair bust a gut laughing at me if she knew where I was right now."

"What about those dozen greenos?"

"Ha! She'll never collect those now. Unless she cares to come out here and scrape them off our bones."

Waley noticed during the remainder of the day's march the curious alertness of Krotch, the way he sat his saddle, his eyes flicking ahead, his hands never straying far from quick-grabbing distance of his arbalest or sword, the reins slack and already bighted to the saddle bow.

No single word of thanks or of reproach had Krotch

spoken. Waley could appreciate either from his companion. He still had no real way of knowing how these people's minds worked. Was Krotch angry? Alarmed—well, Krotch had a way of masking his fears to all but himself. Angry—well, Krotch had changed back into his old boisterous self with an alertness quick-silvered with promise of action that indicated clearly that his anger was not Waley-directed.

The cortege rode on.

Four days later they came to the edge of the desert.

Signs had multiplied over the last day's journeyings, the stunted trees, the coarse grass, the dryness that set a sore thirst along every throat, the fibrillating strands scrabbling desperately beneath the horses' hooves. Then they reached the desert, a barren counterpoint to their future life in Kerim, and the compass needle stolidly pointed on, on across the waste toward the terminal horizon.

Every wineskin and water bottle had been filled at the last stream. They had food for six days—nine at a stretch—and fodder for the horses that might, just, reach that far. Jarfon of Trewes stood in his stirrups and looked sternly down the straggling line. Then—a poetic and romantic gesture in a situation of agonizing reality—he drew his sword. He lifted it high and thrust it forward, pointing along the direction of the compass arrow, pointing to that horizon at the end of the world.

Painfully, the little column picked its way out onto the desert floor.

Of that ride Waley remembered little. Burning sun and burning sand, burning saddle and burning head, the world on fire; a flame within him and without, plunging shafts of golden agony into his brain; his body a torment, he yet rode on and on, as he knew he must, as he knew that for him like them all there was now no other way open. In his head the ride became confused with the galley *Moonflower*. Once more he treaded with the intemperate dingdongg in his ears and the *flick, flick, flick* of Mister Whippy's trademark snapping about his back. His tongue thickened. His dried sweat crackled about his ribs. But he rode.

He asked Pe'Ichen to turn the sand into water and the sand remained hard and gritty and dry.

Despairingly, not caring any more, he asked Pe'Ichen to turn a mound of sand into a nuclear-powered sand-car with giant wheels and tracks. He begged for an internal-combustion powered landrover. He groveled for a flier, for any form of mechanically propelled transport, for something to assuage this torture. He might just as well have asked for an interstellar transceiver.

Men dropped out and died. The column rode on.

For six searing days they continued. On the seventh during an afternoon of liquid bronze and molten gold their horses' hooves gave forth an unnatural sound. The soft everlasting sh-sh-shooshing sussuration gave way to a hard, authoritative tapping, a stony staccato.

Lackluster eyes lifted from the stifling shade of hoods. A man spoke, a croak cracking a dry throat, hawking. Another man fell off his horse, scrabbled on hands and knees. Waley lifted his head as though his neck bore a skull of lead. He saw sand—sand blowing in varicolored striations across a flagged road. A hard rocky road, malformed and heaved up into ankle-twisting precipices—but a road.

A road.

Here, in the midst of the desert.

They gathered, those abandoned waifs of the sands, to stare ahead with frightened speculation.

Ahead stretched desolation. They had seen desolation before—the crazy earth convulsions of the Ma'ad Kratern, the leveled cities of that devilish shore—but nothing had prepared them for this. Girders thrust upward at a distance, sere skeletal fingers, lumps and chunks of masonry hunkered as though whipped; the floor of the desert showed riven wounds, shadow shrouded, malefic. The very absence of material between these isolated relics magnified the proportions of the destruction. One felt the brooding sense of men and women, of a city and all the bustling life of a city, a life-force coiled and living to the full, all banished, stricken from the register of meaningful things, vanished and gone into the vaults of time.

Pointing directly across the center of the desolation the compass needle forced them stumbling on to their destiny.

They camped that night in the uneasy flicker of torches.

Pale washed-out faces and unfocusing eyes bleared corpse-like in white reflections from the shadows. Half a dozen mouthfuls of water sloshed stately at the bottom of Waley's bottle. The idiot-thought that they should turn back grew in his mind and persisted with insane logic; nothing could be hoped for now in continuing this saga of suicide.

Widdershins swirled around them as they broke camp next morning, ochre and yellow sand gritting up into irritating clouds and stinging eyes drugged by unrefreshing sleep.

The idiot-thought of the previous night proved doubly idiotic this morning of shining sand sheets, for if they were fearful of pressing on they knew with dread certainty that only death lay behind them. Forward, then, to the end of the world.

The horses smelled it first.

Dimly and with pain, Waley became sluggishly aware that his mount had stirred a livelier gait into faltering legs. He felt the unaccustomed motion of a horse trying to gallop. The beast lolloped and slid, its head thrust forward, nostrils flaring, struggling and plunging through the sand. Like a band of pilgrims in sight of their prophet they thrust and hustled forward, joints creaking, mouths dry and lips and cheeks drawn together, clothes flapping behind them like vultures' wings.

Waley believed what his eyes told him this time as he had not done when he had first stepped aboard the galley. He had the vested interest of life in believing now.

Ahead the road became smoother, the relics of devastation more completely shattered, all the radiating cracks in the ground narrowing in to their locus and pointing the way ahead. Pale green feathery trees lifted, not drooping but standing proudly with cells full distended with water. Water . . . A feverish greed possessed everyone now and Waley saw men urging on stumbling horses that needed no encouragement. Water . . . Hooves rang hard on stone. Water. Metal accouterments chingled brassily. Water. Garments fluttered and rustled. Water. A hoarse and horrible gasping croaked out from chapped lips: Water. Water . . .

The pool welcomed them like the white outstretched arms of a woman.

Jarfon of Trewes had sense and strength enough left to marshal the rush, to keep the horses from plunging in bodily, to organize, with the help of Krotch and Salop and, to his agonized reluctance, Waley also, a watch that no man or beast or woman drank too deeply.

They sank down on stone benches beside the pool, shaking, wiping lips, letting the water sprinkle in silvery drops onto the pavement, laughing. . . .

Water.

Some indeterminate time later Waley and Krotch with some others walked over to inspect the slender building that, as they quickly saw, stood exactly at the center point of all the radiating cracks. Looking about from that vantage point they could clearly see how all the destruction spread from that spot. Only in a small charmed area directly about the building and including the pool and the trees could they see anything at all resembling normality.

"Look at those trees." Krotch looked up and on his face a grim satisfied expression showed that he had found fresh strength to plan what was to happen.

"Food," said Jarfon of Trewes thankfully. Round ripe fruit hung on the trees, clustering, promising. Waley supposed it sufficient to keep body and soul together—he knew he was still lightheaded, so frightened that fear itself became a live part of his being—enough to last them the journey back. For they had reached the end of their road. No one had now any thought but of return. Even Jarfon of Trewes, even Sufferin, even—oh wretched fates!—even the Princess Kerith of Brianon.

She walked now a pale wraith of a girl, slender, hollow-eyed, an exhausted look of imminent collapse about her. Everyone eyed her askance. What could she be thinking, now that that gloriously begun pilgrimage had faded and ended in this muted disaster? Waley wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her. The incongruity of that surprised him; he felt with an amused cynical giggle that this must be the first time he had even thought of taking a girl into his arms for any other purpose than the obvious one.

Waley had not omitted from his feelings the prescience of Larne of Red Jafare. The young noble had regained much of his usual sang-froid and Waley anticipated trouble. Old Krotch was right. Never in Brianon would Waley be safe from the vengeance of Red Jafare.

Walking toward the building, the Princess Kerith laid a hand on Jarfon of Trewes' arm, saying with a wistful lost look: "Don't hold out any more hope to me, dear Jarfon. You have traveled us a long and weary road and now the journey is finished. No man in all this land could have done half as much as you—so let it be. Rest content."

"It cuts me, my lady; it cuts me sorely. But—"

"We will rest here, gather food, take our water and then return in our footsteps before they are blown away with the rest of the spirits of this land."

"Yes, my lady." They halted before the building. Consisting merely of a shallow domed roof supported on six slender and alien columns from no order classical Earth would have recognized, the building's essential simplicity, in its ivory innocence, charmed and disarmed.

Nothing of danger, of ugliness, of fear, the building seemed to say, could coexist with its own perfection.

Jarfon of Trewes stepped gently onto the tessellated paving beneath the dome, looking up into blue-veined shadows, his face serious and perplexed. The Princess Kerith, Larne of Red Jafare, Krotch, Waley, the small remaining band of Frontiersmen and soldiers, Rowena, the wiseman Sufferin, all of them, looking on, saw Jarfon of Trewes disappear.

When, a moment or two after that impossible vanishment, he reappeared, he had lost his composure. He looked like a small boy who first understands the power of the cane wielded in a stony-hearted master's hands.

"Help me," he whispered, staggering onto the stone flags. The bristle of his beard sagged now, all his fire and power and decision gone. "I'll be all right in a moment. . . . In a moment . . ."

"What happened?"

"What did you see?"

"Are you all right—?"

When he had recovered a tithe of his usual blunt energy,

Jarfon of Trewes said: "I went—somewhere. I cannot recall exactly—but I was upside down, floating. . . . I saw—things. . . . Unearthly, strange things . . . things from nightmare! Leering faces with moving noses and figures for eyes and ears and mouths—leering!"

They clustered close, listening in fear, their faces pinched, mouths loose with the knowledge that arcane forces supplicated here, waiting for sacrifice. Men began to collect the fruit and others to fill water bottles, moving with a jerky urgency of men about their last rites.

Then Jarfon of Trewes finished strangely: "All the time I was—there—I had a foolish memory scurrying around my head. I kept thinking of our gardeners."

Slowly Waley stood up and, taking the compass, walked clear around the six-columned building. Steadily, as he paced, the needle swung, pointing unerringly at the center of the building. So.

So this was where he proved that he had learned the lessons Kerim had taught him. He looked at Krotch, old Krotch, big and bluff, bow-legged and tough, with a face like a child's, nightmare-scared and obsessed by unknown demons of the night.

This thing had to be done quickly or not at all.

He touched a column, feeling it solid and real, and lifted his foot. Everyone looked at him as though caught in a slow-motion film, their motives embalmed in the treacle of time. Then he stepped forth onto the tessellated pavement.

XIV

A DISORIENTATION of perception disrupted his personality; when he felt himself to be Jack Waley again he was in free fall in a vast and brilliantly-lit chamber. He was in free fall. How his familiar space-traveling sensation must have jolted Jarfon of Trewes! He maneuvered himself and clung

to a stanchion and looked out on the panels and dials, the controls, the unfamiliar yet frighteningly intimate façade and control fascia of a computer.

The cybernetics with which he had been acquainted through the perfunctory courtesy of Messrs. Hardacre and Glossop could scarcely prepare him for this crisis; but he could recognize the command chair and console, the general layout, all strictly from the consumer's end.

He drifted across and sat down. No straps were provided.

Before him stretched banks of dials and meters, those "faces" with swinging noses and figures for eyes and ears that Jarfon of Trewes had described with such evident horror. Carefully he did not touch any of the controls studding the broad arms of the chair. He would have to feel his way around this brute before any attempt at control or even communication could be established.

In his head, whispering exactly as he had imagined a telepathic thought would speak to him, a voice said:

"We are still functioning at better than ninety-nine point nine-nine percent optimum and gap will increase gap programmed input."

"Gap?" asked Waley, quite prepared to handle this machine's communications system, only thankful he was not expected to punch out miles of tape. He had always been all thumbs at that occupational hazard.

"What service do you require?"

"What is gap?"

"Question not understood gap."

Waley thought of his artistically-lettered diploma from Hardacre and Glossop proclaiming to a bored galaxy that he Jack Waley, Earth, was a trained computer salesman. Well. Now was his chance to learn.

"Are you Pe'Ichen?"

"Yes."

Just like that. Yes. Are you God? Yes. But Pe'Ichen was not God. Pe'Ichen was a fantastically competent and advanced computer. What else would an educated—or half-educated man of the galaxy expect?

Magic?

"How old are you?"

"Question without meaning. Pe'Ichen was. Pe'Ichen is."

"When was the last time you communicated directly like this?"

"Gap. Of a time scale measured by the annual orbits of this planet about its sun, five hundred thousand, eight hundred and seventy-two years, two hundred days and gap twenty-five minutes, and fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, seconds gap—"

"Cease the count." If a Kerim year was roughly the same as a Terrestrial year, as Waley felt to be a reasonable assumption—well, Pe'Ichen was ancient—ancient. . . .

This word gap continually obtruding into the conversation worried Waley. He ought to have paid more attention in class.

"Can you give me a brief rundown on the way you create artifacts on demand?"

"Question understood. Basic. Matrix of every artifact required by man is stored in my memory cells. On request and with simulacrum as key artifact is transmitted. Gap—" Pe'Ichen then began a detailed exposition that left Waley cold. Not that he didn't understand the science involved—he didn't—but everything vital had been said in those few simple words. You put down your analogue and sent your request and Pe'Ichen transmitted the article. Just like that.

The men who had designed and built this machine had created a cornucopia of scientific marvels—so what had happened to them?

"Pe'Ichen endures. Pe'Ichen has been programmed to supply the wants of men. This Pe'Ichen does."

"But your builders—the first ones—?"

"Changes have taken place on this planet. The new men came and they left, also. The younger men arrived and grew and they, too, left. Now there are children inhabiting this world."

Children.

Waley was too engrossed in this simple tabular tale of a planet's population history to feel the fear in him. He

leaned forward. This, he had to know. For this, he was here.

"Why are no children being born on this planet?"

"Pe'Ichen does this gap through kindness."

"Kindness? What does a robot know of emotions?"

"Pe'Ichen has been programmed. Gap gap gap."

"Programmed!" Waley felt incensed. "What do you mean by all this lollygagging gapping?" He stabbed an accusing finger. "My guess is you're killing off men so you can have your scousing machines go in and take over this planet!"

"Gap—" began Pe'Ichen, but Waley rushed on heatedly.

"You're carrying out a robot conquest, that's what you're doing, Pe'Ichen!"

"Gap gap," the voice in his mind whispered. "Gap untrue. Gap. Statement without validity. Gap, gap, gap. Gentle end to humanity indicated by extrapolation. All is best, programmed gap indications all point to this as most satisfactory solution."

The voice sounded for the first time in Waley's mind as a mechanical reproduction, chilling, like a recorder with a stuck relay, parroting meaningless words.

"Who dropped the bomb topside?" demanded Waley savagely. "Why do you not create food and drink? Why are you preventing the birth of children? Demand full and satisfactory explanation—now!"

All during the ghostly conversation lights had flickered on and off; meters indicated drain loads; dials flickered needles in a trembling dance of channeled power. All that busy occupation indicated the demands being made on Pe'Ichen all over Kerim. Men and women were asking for and receiving the artifacts the matrices of which lay stored in this machine's memory. A sweet system—but . . . But what dark secret was Pe'Ichen hiding? Waley knew the secret existed and, stubbornly and with a shame-faced feeling of inadequacy, he meant to get the better of this heap of machinery.

"Demand explanation in full—now!"

"Bomb a result of gap between opposing ideologies—screens covering Pe'Ichen alone remained intact. Builders

dispersed. Food and drink not programmed unless special gap in extremis gap. Since total destruction of planet imminent no children need be born."

Waley let the meanings flow over him. War had turned the city of Pe'Ichen's builders into the vast wastelands above. He persisted in thinking of this machine room as being below the surface of the planet although nothing apart from the situation of the columned building on the surface gave any hint of that possibility. The free fall conditions could, and more probably, indicate an orbital space station.

Food and drink—well, if he'd known the correct request he would not have suffered as he had in the desert. He would have to learn the form there before he left—but . . . But—

Children.

"Why is this planet about to be destroyed?"

Monstrous impossible words.

"This solar system's sun is due to go nova."

Well.

You couldn't have it more plainly than that.

"When?"

"In fifty-five years—hourly forecast has proved impracticable."

Everything was there now, all neatly docketed and fitted into a logic of insanity. And yet—"You said you were preventing the birth of children because of kindness?"

"Affirmative. Seventy-five years of life is adequate to the human physiological system exhibited by gap people here now. They will all be gone before nova."

Waley raged. "You call that kindness? Haven't you considered what it's going to be like for those people when they are all seventy-five? A whole world of people seventy-five years old? Can't your sensory banks at least extrapolate the possibilities?" Waley felt sick.

"Information has been known to Pe'Ichen for some time. Beginning of cancellation of births timed to coincide with seventy-five year period to nova. Program concurs. Is correct procedure." A pause and then, like a hiccup: "Gap."

"And that's why you haven't been bothering to repair

the houses? Less people, less housing space needed? By what *right* do you do this, Pe'Ichen?"

If Waley expected the question to clog Pe'Ichen's mechanical and electronic thought processes he was disappointed. Flat in his mind: "I have been programmed."

"But you can't have been programmed to wipe out the very people you protect! Good grief, Pe'Ichen—you were built to serve men and women; that is the whole purpose of your function. How can you relate that simple directive to this—this death wish you've acquired?"

"I serve and look after mankind. As a machine I have been programmed to do only what is good for humanity. Human life on this planet is doomed. The planet is doomed. It is better for mankind to die gently of natural causes rather than to suffer the horror of extinction by nova—"

"You are using emotional phrases. I suppose the analogues of their meanings have been programmed."

"Cap. I, too, will be destroyed."

"And death from a nova is a natural cause, heaven help us."

"Remark does not bear examination in this context."

Evidently Pe'Ichen had run through his sob-stuff memory banks and was back to being the great mechanical father-figure. Waley felt shriveled. Logic told him that Pe'Ichen was operating logically; emotion, too, told him that to die—from natural causes!—was better than being eternally scorched in the cosmic flame of a nova—but . . .

"Can you appreciate what is going on right now in Kerim?"

"Yes. Much is regretted"—again that programmed cold evaluation of emotions as though they could be parceled up and doled out through electronic circuits—"but this is better than letting nothing happen until the end."

"That's open to argument," said Waley sourly. "You haven't *felt* these people's sorrow—you haven't smelled and tasted the horror of those devil cities on the shore."

Waley felt like a rat trapped by a hound dog. What could he say that would make this machine change its cybernetic mind? If only he hadn't goofed off so much from those computer classes. . . .

He swallowed and licked his lips. He would try another tack. He said: "I am not of this planet, Pe'Ichen. I wish to contact my own people."

"This is not possible. All other planets of this solar system are unsuitable for human life. You are human. Therefore you are of this planet."

"Glib but false, Pe'Ichen. I am not of this planet. I come from Earth—which is, I forget how many parsecs, but a lot of light-years away. There's a planet called Umbril around near here. I was going there, anyway. I must contact them via an interstellar transceiver. Now—"

But Pe'Ichen interrupted.

"It is laid down that nothing can exceed the speed of light—"

"I dare say your people had their Einstein, too, and we wouldn't be where we are today without him or someone like him. What you say is true, applied to this space-time continuum. But there are others, call them dimensions if you will, in which, although traveling below the speed of light, it is possible to travel faster than light relative to this." Waley expounded the familiar hyperspace theory, used in practice by Solterranean Starships.

Pe'Ichen remained silent when he had finished.

"Well?"

"These concepts have not been programmed. But I have data with which to compare and to evaluate. Wait."

"Courtesy got gapped then, huh?" said Waley, strangely lightheaded and relieved. He'd thrown an in curve at Pe'Ichen and the computer was working on it. Fine.

"Before you begin," he said quickly. "Why am I in free fall here? Are we in space?"

"Not in space. Not aware of free fall conditions. Checking."

Waley pushed off and began a halfhearted exploration of the control center. No wonder Jarfon of Trewes had been scared witless! This scientific colossus was enough to daunt even the bravest of hearts lacking a scientific education no matter how sketchy.

Still and all—he *wished* he'd learned more at school. . . .

Softly he began singing familiar lines without at first aware that he was doing so.

*"Oh, we'll lolly the gags and gag the lollies,
We'll ride o'er the horizon's rim,
Our princess' eyes are blue-oh,
Our sweet princess' eyes are blue . . ."*

"Now, how," he said disgustedly to himself, "did that drop of nonsense get snarled up with a computer?"

He felt better. He was now convinced that Pe'Ichen would see sense. Once he was in contact with Umbril he could arrange for the survivors of *Bucentaure* to be picked up. The thought of doing that made him even more perky. As for this story of a nova . . . That would have to be checked. Interstellar Traffic Control would want to know, for a start.

He poked around among the banks and controls like a boy on his first day at the seaside, his head full of wild dreams of a find—any find—that would come up to his dreams and expectations. Grandiose dreams of a planetary mass-exodus lifted his spirits, filling him with a golden glow of prophecy. Somehow something would turn up to bring the people of Kerim back into currency again.

In his reaction swing to optimism—how could he take seriously this story of a sun becoming a murdering nova, a world marked for destruction?—the problem of incompatible time-scales bothered him as once the problem of incompatible genes had done. His life expectancy like any person of the galaxy within the aegis of Earth's geriatric techniques was at least two hundred Terran years. Yet Pe'Ichen set the people of Kerim at the biblical three scores and ten, plus a five for good behavior, and the meaning of this could not be avoided by high-flown phrases, good will or of flip back-handed double-talk. He would have to live with that knowledge and seek to compress every single tiny instant of living so that in the after years he could draw out that treasure house of memory.

A small opening at the foot of the fascia, a door high and wide enough to admit him if he went through head first, attracted his attention with a fresh and novel idea.

Perhaps he could crawl through there and inspect the workings of Pe'Ichen, gain a better insight into the craft of those builders of long ago. Gravity caught him as he entered, the normal near-enough one terrestrial gravity to which he had become accustomed over the past months, and he squashed out to the floor with a surprised "oof!" of exhaled air.

A single glance convinced him that his knowledge would be of no use here. Faceless panels covering every wall of every aisle leading off from the entrance could not conceal the brute force of power silently pursuing its course. He had wit enough to recognize that science of this order would not be susceptible to his careless dilettante attitude. Cables looped from sockets, tidily bunched, color coded; but these cables alone suffered from such a complexity of input and output connections that merely recognizing them as power sources became of itself a minor victory.

Everything in here as outside in the front office shone clean and bright occasioning no surprise to Waley, familiar with automatic cleansing techniques.

He walked slowly along the aisles wishing Pe'Ichen would hurry up, recognizing that he walked, as it were, through the brain of the being he thus apostrophized, feeling thirst and hunger now that the lift of talking to the machine had gone. He turned a corner and then stopped, intending to return to the main chamber and see about some food and drink.

Somewhere above him daylight seeped wanly down, an unhealthy blue mingling with the steady beat of yellow artificial light. He looked up but could see no source.

He thought it was daylight. It could just as easily have been another blue-lit chamber. In the scale of affairs in which he was now engaged he put it out of his mind. He would return to the columned building with dignity, as he had come, as Jarfon of Treweas had returned, not scrambling like a rat from a burrow.

At his feet moss grew. Ants moved here, whirligigging about their consuming business, black motes streaming to and fro with the awful blind purpose that brooked no obstacle. Intrigued, he bent closer.

With agile tacky fingers the moss pursued the scurry-

ing ants, caught them and engulfed them. Yet still they poured on in a black shining ribbon. Scavenging for droppings from the world above they sought their food and were in their turn inexorably trapped. The moss clung green and moving slightly with its tacky fingers writhing, a broad mass covering an angle of wall and panel, as though a can of green paint had been flung down in temper.

Waley wondered why the cleansing techniques had not sprayed the area with weed-killer. But here, in the very brain of Pe'Ichen, the moss grew strongly. He saw ants incautiously scuttle too close, become entrapped as a tacky finger lashed out; he saw them drawn in and tucked with a neat impersonal gesture beneath the moss.

He lifted a corner of the moss, feeling tendrils pull away. A burning sensation in his fingers, quick and light, like a match-flame scorching, told him that the acid secretion of the moss snuffed the life from the ants with merciful speed. He let the moss drop back, seeing cables looping from their junction boxes above the green stain, to wend their way along from section to section beyond.

The feeling of a star soaring to burst soundlessly in his head dizzied him.

He couldn't be sure, of course, but . . . But!

He ran back to the main chamber and sat down breathlessly in the chair, only as he did so realizing that free fall had been replaced by one Kerimatic gravity.

Pe'Ichen said: "I have the answer."

The delicious sense of letting it wait to happen fondled Waley in luxuriousness. "Well?"

"The theories prove acceptable to logic. They should have been programmed before."

"That's another result of the folk who built you not having spaceflight. Can you build an interstellar transceiver?"

"That is simple."

To a machine like Pe'Ichen, Waley supposed, that was.

"Well, get with it, then, me old lollygagging lump of machinery." Bubbles seemed to spume up joyously in Waley's brain, intoxicating him with exhilaration.

"The panel to the right of the chair contains all the necessary controls."

"The man's work being carried on in your guts, right?" Waley didn't care, now. He felt drunk with power. He pulled the control panel across on silent gimbals and saw—a sight he had abandoned from possibility—once more the controls, alien but recognizable, of an interstellar transceiver, sound only, no crackle finish and no guarantee or money back. . . . He was, he decided with a giggle, a little delirious.

Calling Umbril turned out to be anticlimax.

He made a silly mistake as soon as the strong voice came through, puzzled, speaking gal-linga with a lipping Solmartian accent.

"Solterran Starship *Moonflower*?" said the voice. "We have no flight records of such a vessel in this sector of space—"

"No, no!" shouted Waley. "I mean Starship *Bucentaure!*"

"*Bucentaure!* Captain Rattray!" The Martian voice hardened. "Where are you speaking from? All contact has been lost—"

"We're survivors. You'll have to take a D.F. on my signal. I'm down on a planet uncoordinated with the Solterran system."

"Tough. What took so long? Transceiver repair?"

Interstellar Spacetransport Control was accustomed to calls beaming in from the depths of space telling of misfortunes, still fresh in everyone's mind—and they calculated that delays resulted ninety percent of the time in putting a damaged interstellar transceiver into operation.

"You could call it that," Waley said. "When you've figured out just where we are, would you run a check on the sun? There's a story going about that it's due to go nova."

Pe'Ichen said, with ghostly force in Waley's mind: "Due in fifty-five years time—hourly forecast has proved impracticable."

"Pipe down, you clockwork misery monger," Waley said with heat. "No, I.S.C., not you—"

The Martian voice brought a strong sense of home to Waley. That guy, he realized, sitting on his backside in the I.S.C. offices on Umbril, was near as far from home as was Waley. "We'll run a check. If true, could be interesting. We'll have quick a rush of astronomers in this neck of the woods."

"Leave you to it, feller."

"Check. Call you back as soon as we have preliminary information on rescue timings. On the nova bit—that'll take longer."

"Check. Out."

Then Waley, the new Waley, said diffidently: "Oh—and thanks."

"Our pleasure, pal. Out."

So that would take care of Captain Rattray, and Maisie d'Angelo and Diana Darkster and the others from *Bucen-taure*. The chief engineer might be persuaded to lay down his wrench. Jack Waley was still unpersuaded that the chief *ought* to lay down that wrench. . . .

"Right, old mechanical monster," Waley said jovially, full of confidence now. "When was the last time you gave yourself a Spring Clean?"

"Contextual imperatives obscure but meaning correlated," said Pe'Ichen in his flat whispering voice in Waley's mind. Waley chuckled. If Pe'Ichen had been human that voice would have been very huffy, very huffy indeed. "Standards of cleanliness as programmed have been maintained."

"Yes. But." Waley experienced a quick treacherous draining of confidence; then, mastering the doubt, he went on: "Check around your back alleys. Better still—give me a quick-acting weed-killer and we'll maybe find out a thing or three, huh?"

A closet door clicked open and a round-bodied robot, similar to the decadent orange gardeners, trundled out, spray nozzle at the ready. Waley directed it to the moss. He wondered why, now that he appeared to be succeeding, he had reverted to his old-time cynically would-be flip style of talk, and could only suppose that the reaction had forced him in alien surroundings to grope back for reassurance to a more familiar framework.

Pe'Ichen said: "Gap. Gap-gap-gap." He said it for some time until Waley said sharply: "Knock it off, Pe'Ichen!"

Then: "Ninety-nine point nine-nine percent function of efficiency now explained. Trouble cleared. Now functioning at one hundred percent." Waley knew enough about computers to know that would be unlikely; but he had to allow for

Pe'Ichen's transference into Earthly percentages his own standards of measurement.

"I guessed it. You were cut off from a whole bank of your circuits and you didn't even know."

"Function above ninety-nine percent acceptable—"

"Yeah. So they always said. But you are a machine, and you were given the well-being of humans. All humanity on this planet was in your care, in the care of a machine, and that rates better than ninety-nine percent care!"

He considered, and then, very solemnly, fully understanding the gravity of the next few moments, said: "Check your calculations of this sun's nova again."

"Check in progress."

A wait. Waley sat still, his hands limp on the broad arms of the chair, not touching the control studs. All of life was a waiting, waiting to be born, waiting to die. What you did with the time of waiting was what mattered, although sometimes even that simple philosophy had fallen out of favor with cynical defeated mentalities. But if you didn't try hard, no matter at what aspect of life you turned your hand, you might as well cut your throat at the same time they cut the umbilical cord.

Pe'Ichen said: "Sun due to go nova in fifty-five—"

Waley, listening, swallowed.

"—thousand million years."

Waley blinked. He wiped a finger across his eyes. Swallowed again. Shook his head. Said: "You lollygagging scousing slopbucket of a useless electronic cybernetic schoots! I ought to kick your circuits in for you!"

An unpleasant thought occurred to him. "And what is I.S.C. going to say to me when they've run that check, hey?"

"Prognosis of nova not computable to individual years—"

"Oh, wrap up!" He stood up, feeling the tiredness of elation inflating his limbs. "You'd better start letting children be born again, hadn't you?"

"Begun."

Something of the old Jack Waley sparked.

"And that'll scare the living daylight out of a lot of 'em who've been lollygagging around! Haw haw! But the world will live again."

"Check."

That irritating "gap" had left Pe'Ichen's whispered words now. The symptom of the machine's malaise, it vanished with the cure.

Waley said: "Let me have a portable interstellar transceiver. And tell me how to create—that is, call on you for—food and drink. We've a desert to cross."

The transceiver appeared at his elbow, not terrestrial but recognizable and operational. "You must ask of me to the second order. Then only will I obey."

Waley started to quip: "What about the third order?" Instead he picked up the transceiver and slung its plastic strap over his shoulder. Then, speaking with a low venomous sincerity, he said: "You are a machine, Pe'Ichen, a machine created by men to serve their needs and to protect them. You failed to do that. You malfunctioned. You made a mistake. A crack in the ceiling allowed dirt and seeds to tumble down, allowed the moss to grow and the ants to burrow. The moss was not cleared away and you were cut off from a bank of circuits—and you malfunctioned." For horror of the near-catastrophe shook Waley now, thinking about it in this new light. "A machine was given the lordship over men's protection and you made a mistake and you condemned mankind to death! You can't think like a man, machine, despite your marvelous complexity. What would you have done after all men had died and the sun had not gone nova? Hey? What good would you have been then?"

And Pe'Ichen said simply: "I would have waited until the next men came."

"Get me out of here," said Jack Waley. "Before I tear this place to bits!"

He stood on the tessellated pavement beneath the graceful curve of the domed columned building and all around him men fought and screamed and blood cascaded and horrors from the air darted and swooped and killed.

He saw Muzzerin go down, a sting as thick as a lance protruding both sides of his body; he saw Jarfon of Trewes flailing a giant battleaxe; he saw old Furze and Salop, back to back, their armor streaming with sticky ichor, slaying

and slaying. He returned to the world of men to a screeching bedlam.

"My God!" said Jack Waley, shuddering with so unexpected a terror smothering down on all his vaunting confidence.

The things looked to be oversize bees, chunky of furry body, multiple wings beating in frenzy, cluster of long legs tucked up beneath, banded, green of a sickly hue, purple of a bruise, darting and wheeling, churring a droning note of hate, insensate with killing fury. Their stings hung low and raked forward, the tip beneath at least two feet beyond the head. They aroused an instinctive dread and horror in Waley.

"Pe'Ichen," he said, unable to mouth the words, letting them form as they would: "On the first, second, third umpteenth order—give me a"—he paused, snatched out his knife, held it like a pistol—"give me a hand-weapon laser beam gun!"

Alien, unfamiliar, with ridged butt and bulbous barrel, the gun appeared, chill, in his hand. He shot at the nearest thing and saw its pulpy body dissolve and shred away. He swung around, yelling in a maniacal monotone, shooting, shooting, shooting.

As though through a faulty stereoscope he saw Larne of Red Jafare, blood-smeared, swing a wild ineffectual sword at the thing that dropped down on him, sting raked down, seeking with blood-speckled tip. He lifted the gun. He saw Krotch leap forward, weaponless, his shattered sword still dangling by its leather loop from his wrist, hurl his bold bulky body forward.

"No!" screamed Waley.

Krotch lunged. His shaggy beard brushed against the thing's legs. His own tough body interposed and the tip of the sting that had been unerringly aimed at Larne of Red Jafare plunged clean through Krotch and dug deeply into the cracked flags below. Krotch jerked like a beetle.

Trembling, a redness falling before his eyes so that aiming became a matter of delicate exactness in that roaring bedlam, Waley fired.

The thing dissolved.

But Krotch—Krotch lay on the flags, the sting uplifting from him like an obscene needle. Larne of Red Jafare scrambled away from Krotch, his face slack, the vomit pouring from his mouth and nose. Waley ran. He took Krotch's head and nestled it on his knees. He looked at the sting through his comrade's body and his mind shuddered.

"Krotch—"

"Where've you been—me old lapsaloozer? It was—a good fight."

"Krotch—why? You great buffoon—why? Why for that of-fal Larne of Red Jafare? Oh, *Krotch!*"

Krotch tried to smile, his hand reaching out for Waley's arm. "The debt is canceled now, Jack. Dear old Jack, the wet-behind-the-ears boy from the green wood! You've been a good comrade, Jack, best a man could have. . . ." The color had left Krotch's face now and the skin stretched gray and indecent. He closed his eyes.

Waley heard Larne of Red Jafare moving and swung a hating face on him.

"He speaks the truth, Jack." Red Jafare wiped his fouled face, shaking. "He gave his life. The debt is settled."

Waley looked back on Krotch. "I'd take on a million debts rather than this!"

"Don't—be a lollygagging scouse—Jack." Weak the words, hoarse and rattling the breath. Waley bent lower. "No point in going on—anyway. Lollygagging world's finished. No kids."

Waley could not tell Krotch. Not now. A man had a right to his pride when he died.

"You've been the best comrade—" he said.

But Krotch slipped down, his head lolling. Faintly, Waley caught the whispered broken words: "*Our princess' eyes are blue-oh, Our sweet princess' eyes are . . .*"

After a moment he looked up at Larne of Red Jafare, who was standing up, looking about, already taking back to himself the attributes of his nobility. For a moment Waley was tempted to strike down the jackanapes and then—no . . . no, he couldn't throw Krotch's sacrifice back in his dead comrade's face.

There would be time to tell the Princess Kerith of Brianon

that children would once more come into the world, that the houses would be repaired, that life could go on again. There would be time to tell the survivors of *Bucentaure* that rescue was coming for them. There would be time, even, to realize that he alone had not been responsible for the wreck of *Bucentaure*; that that was a shared blame.

And there would be time to go back to the green wood to find Drubal and Mimi—Mimi . . .

Yes, there would be time, later on.

But right now Jack Waley sat dry-eyed holding the body of his comrade Krotch.

Lucky Jack Waley . . .

Lucky Jack Waley?

Here's a quick checklist of recent releases of

ACE SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS

F-titles 40¢ M-titles 45¢ G-titles 50¢ N-titles 95¢

- G-605 AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #1: *The Flying Saucer Gambit***
by Larry Maddock
- F-416 UTOPIA MINUS X** by Rex Gordon
- G-606 THE MAN WITHOUT A PLANET** by Lin Carter
and **TIME TO LIVE** by John Rackham
- M-154 INVADERS FROM THE INFINITE**
by John W. Campbell
- F-420 PROFESSOR JAMESON #1:**
The Planet of the Double Sun by Neil R. Jones
- G-609 CONTRABAND FROM OTHERSPACE**
by A. Bertram Chandler
and **REALITY FORBIDDEN** by Philip E. High
- F-421 ANARCHAOS** by Curt Clark
- N-3 DUNE** by Frank Herbert
- F-422 THE SWORD OF RHIANNON** by Leigh Brackett
- G-611 THE BEST FROM FANTASY AND SCIENCE FICTION,**
12th Series edited by Avram Davidson
- F-425 WORLD WITHOUT STARS** by Poul Anderson
- F-426 THE GENETIC GENERAL** by Gordon R. Dickson
- M-155 FOUR FOR TOMORROW** by Roger Zelazny
- G-614 ENVOY TO THE DOG STAR**
by Frederick L. Shaw, Jr.
and **SHOCK WAVE** by Walt & Leigh Richmond
- F-427 THE EINSTEIN INTERSECTION** by Samuel R. Delany
- F-429 THE WORLD JONES MADE** by Philip K. Dick
- G-620 AGENT OF T.E.R.R.A. #2:**
The Golden Goddess Gambit by Larry Maddock
-

If you are missing any of these, they can be obtained directly from the publisher by sending the indicated sum, plus 5¢ handling fee per copy, to Ace Books, Inc. (Dept. MM), 1120 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10036