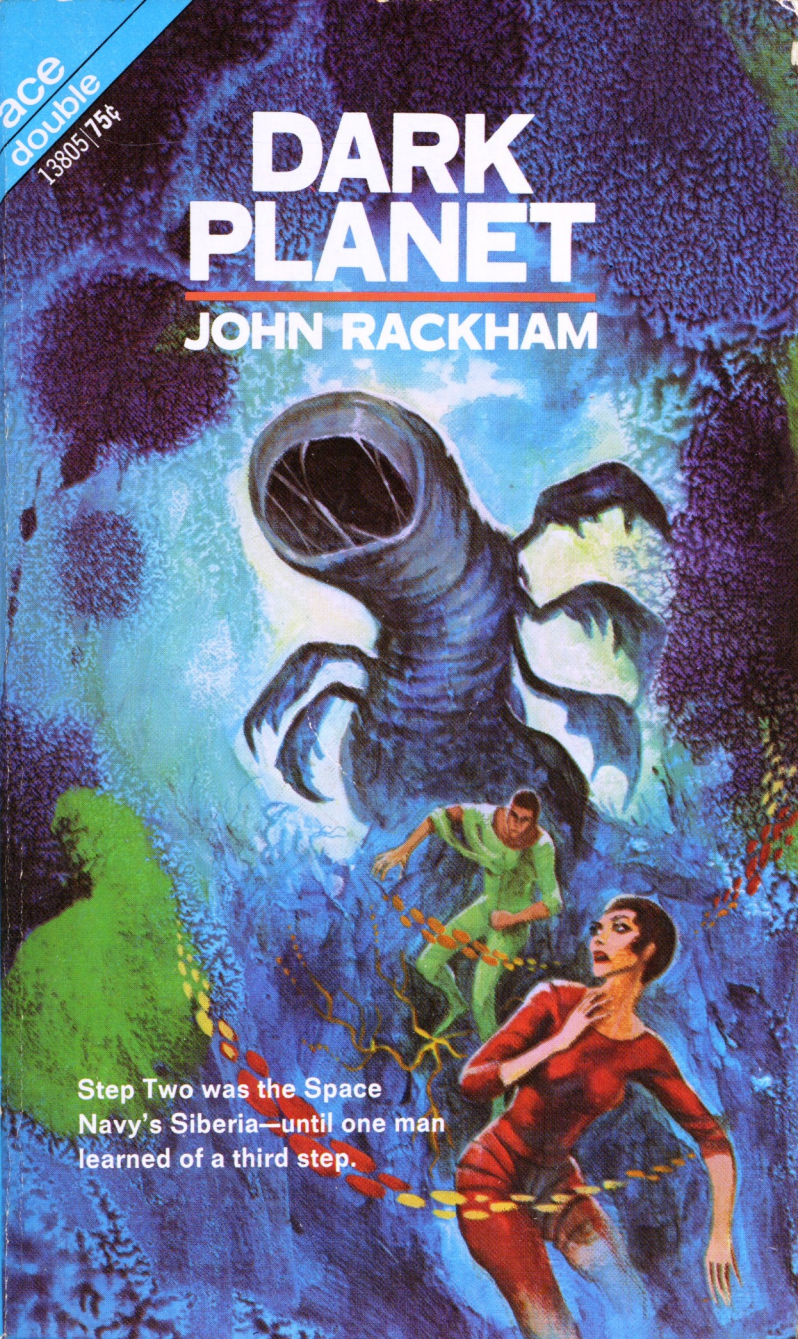


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DARK PLANET

JOHN RACKHAM



Step Two was the Space
Navy's Siberia—until one man
learned of a third step.

Stephen Query had been condemned to serve out his space enlistment on Step Two, the unknown mudball way station. Query had been made a mere technician there at the enclosed domed-in base because he refused to accept automaton status. But Query found that Step Two meant for him at least the freedom of privacy and daydream even though one step outside the Dome without protective clothing could mean death. Or so everyone said . . .

Until Stephen and the admiral who had ordered him to that dark planet were thrown defenseless into the muddy misty world beyond the Dome. There could be no hope of rescue, for Step Two's officers had concealed the crash of the admiral's vessel and no one at the base even knew they were lost.

They wandered hopeless, starving and thirsty, knowing there was no hope—and then, there was a noise, there were those strange colors, there was something emerging from the dark planet beyond all conception. . . .

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DARK PLANET

JOHN RACKHAM

ACE BOOKS

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I

HE STOOD UP TO HIS KNEES in hot mud, the wet weight of it pressing the inert plastic of his suit warmly against his legs. Inside the suit he was a trifle more than comfortably warm, aware of beads of sweat that formed and trickled and stung his eyes. The lung-pack on his back labored ceaselessly to keep that level despite the close to boiling, steamy air outside. And that air wasn't just hot and humid, it was alive: a seething soup of microorganisms that were perpetually hungry. The planet surface slow-boiled constantly at the bottom of a hundred-mile blanket of shimmering blue green, voracious air that had its own furtive glow, giving a visibility of something under ten yards, and even that was uncertain as to edge and color. And Stephen Query liked it, felt happy in it, as he was now.

He knew himself to be odd and was, therefore, sane. Either a man gets to the age of maturity believing everyone else is crazy but him, in which case he is insane, or he realizes that it's everybody else who is normal and he's the odd one, and he stays sane. But alone. Query liked to be alone. Here, if he forgot the thin thread of plastic line that was his clue back to the Dome, he could be alone as never before. Alone in a sea of mud with shimmer green walls and ceiling and the silent yet urgent surge of alien jungle all about him. Alone to think, not so much about this wild environment, but about himself.

There was enough room in his mind to feel mildly grateful for the "bending" of Dome regulations that allowed him this escape; to recall the words of Sergeant Keast: "Don't see why the hell not, Query, on your own time! It don't cost anything, and you sure as hell aren't going to run off, out there. Where to, huh?" And "run off" was a valid

point, for service here, on this nameless planet, at this base called, simply, Step Two, was a form of punishment. So Query had room to feel just that small twinge of gratitude. But for everything else to do with Space Service and what it stood for he felt no gratitude whatever. He rejected it with the solid and total stubbornness with which he had rejected each and every other form of regimentation that came with being human. And that itself was a problem he needed to think about, to reach some kind of decision on.

But thinking, for Query, was more a process of letting his mind run where it wanted to and following after it with interest to see what it turned up, and then to wonder at it. Such as now, in the middle of seething life that he could feel on all sides though it was utterly silent. No birds sang; no insects buzzed; nothing splashed the mud with running feet. But he called back his mind from that and brought it to the question. To be, or not. He knew Hamlet's speech, admired the sonorous phrases, but his problem came to simpler terms and in older language still. "*Humanus sum, et nihil humanum a me alienum puto.*" I am human, and therefore nothing human is alien to me. But he felt alien to it, inescapably. So what to do? The prospect of yielding, allowing himself to be slotted into the structure of society just like everyone else, was terrifying. It had the feel of living death. On the other hand, was the life he had led so far so very wonderful? Was it worth it just for the sake of integrity? Or to refine it right down to the basics "Who am I, that I can expect everybody else to move over to make room for me?"

That fascinating but unanswerable question went aglimmering as the smooth surface of the chocolate brown mud right in front of him grew a bump. A ripple, and up came the pale green spike of something that grew with visible speed, thrusting up like a spear, swelling, forming a bulb on a slim stem. He could have reached out and touched it. It shook with urgency, strained and swayed, and even as the fattening head lifted clear of the mud, he saw ravenous decay attacking it, saw the sudden cluster of yellow spots which spread fast and coalesced into a whole, so that the burgeoning head drooped and bent back. And swelled more. And burst to discharge a puff of tiny white

specks that floated on the mud for a breath and were gone, were all swallowed up like their parent.

There was significance here. He pondered on it. Life was that fast in this hothouse, but the essence was the same anywhere. Fight and die. Eat and be eaten. Emerge for a brief moment then fall back into the vast anonymity . . . that was it. Individuality was a temporary illusion in the eternity of life itself. Only the idea itself lives on. Like Space Service itself, even. Conditions changed. Personnel changed, officers and men came and went. Ships were built and flew, served and fell out, or were destroyed. Everything changed except the Space Service idea, the concept itself. "And whatever else I am," he thought, "I am not a concept!"

Trained caution made him squint aside at the register on his helmet wall. A little under an hour left on the lung-pack, and it would take him half of that to get back to the Dome, trailing back along that line. That plastic link, by itself, was something to wonder at. Without the discovery of that virtually indestructible, totally inert molecule this base would never have been built, would have been out of the question. And this ball of hot, sizzling mud, dark and jungle grown, would never have known the impact of human curiosity. It was just a wild planet of an insignificant sun, halfway between Sigma Draconis and the Alkaid cluster in the Great Bear.

But then Query rethought it. The plastic had made the base possible, true, but it had been one man's decision that had brought it into reality. And that man symbolized for Query everything he detested about society in general and the Space Service in particular. Gareth Evans . . . even the sound of the archaic given name was somehow typical of the man's impossible arrogance. Old Gravel Guts Evans, general officer commanding the whole Space Service in its glorious hour of emergency. Glorious? Query knew very little of what the Service had been like in peaceful times. Like many another, he had been ruthlessly snatched from civilian anonymity and drilled into some skill he could handle, in his case the repair and maintenance of instruments to do with ships and drives and flight . . . and that was it. And the Service, under the unexpected impact of the full-blown Settlers' Revolt in the Alkaid

cluster, was a curious hodgepodge. A general officer commanding who called himself an admiral . . . technicians . . . sergeants . . . regulations that came so fast and changed so often that no one man could keep them all in mind. A mess, and all to restrain a group of people who wanted to run their own affairs without interference from Earth. An old and stupid story, repeated in the historical record a thousand times. *Glorious?*

Query loathed it with all his being, but he had learned the hard way to at least make the appearance of conforming. And the job had called for very little of his intelligence. So, as so often before, he had carefully wrapped the cloak of camouflage about himself. Until chance had ripped it wide open. Until an inspecting lieutenant had said, offhandedly, "You have those modules upside down, Instrumentman. Correct it."

"But that's correct as per diagram, sir!"

As simple as that. And perversely, for Query had drawn a line, as he did occasionally, against being screwed down out of sight. He was right, the lieutenant was wrong, and he stuck stubbornly to that. Experimental test and proof would have been simple, but that was no longer the point at issue. Minor insubordination blew itself up into a full-scale court-martial, in itself an index of the general morale of the time, for the rebel Settlers were having things largely their own way then. There was also the awful fact about courts-martial in the military mind: you must be guilty of *something*, or it would never have got that far!

And then chance again. It just so happened that old Gravel Guts himself was on Moon Base at the time and decided to sit in. And though the hard-nosed court could find nothing specific, it was he who biased the whole outcome. He, who could think only in terms of discipline, tradition and the rule book, brought his influence to bear. The upshot was that Query had been shipped out from his quiet anonymity among the instrument repair section of Moon Base, and dropped here, on this mud ball. The forgotten men, each and every one of them with cause to remember Evans . . . and not in their prayers. His job was as it had always been, to check out, overhaul, calibrate and test, repair and/or replace all those instruments that enable

ships to fly; a steady, delicate, but noninspiring job, no matter where it was done.

Except that here, Step Two, was a punishment in itself for the ordinary trooper. Moon Base and all the other bases like it weren't exactly pleasure camps, but they did have amenities. Video, canteen, recreation spaces . . . and women. There was also some kind of hospital-convalescence facility for the repair of men as well as machines. And authority had learned, the hard way, that men need women and vice versa, so the hospitals were staffed accordingly. But not here. Sick men didn't stop off here, only partly disabled ships and those in need of stores, fuel and supplies. And the staff didn't merit kinder consideration. They weren't permanent but serving sentences of greater or lesser duration, and that was all they thought about. *When do I get away?* There was a kind of black psychology about it in that it made men behave, keep their noses clean and their eyes fixed on the goal of eventual return to civilization.

Of them all, Query was the only one who liked it, who had come to appreciate the alien quality of the place as having something akin to his own nature. Not that it detracted anything from his detestation for Admiral Evans. In his mind, that old man served as focus for his more general detestation of the whole of humanity. For the war itself he felt nothing at all. It was just one more example of society eating out its own guts.

Query flicked another glance at his register. Ten more minutes. He dragged his mind away from futile thoughts about Evans. The old fool thought he had meted out punishment, whereas, in fact, he had done Query a service. Never in all his life had he imagined such a place as this. A whole world hidden and secret, with a dark and wild beauty all its own. Tangled creeper and stem and root all writhing to survive. And those immense blue black columns that stood straight up into the unknown mist above. Trees of some kind. Enormous and inscrutable. Did they have leaves and fruit, he wondered? What was it all for? Could there properly be a purpose in all this life, if there was no consciousness to understand it? Sometimes he had the acute sense that this dark underworld was as much aware of him as he was of it . . . and that feeling came very

strongly now, of something out there on the other side of his helmet transparency, watching him.

And he saw it. In that instant he froze dead still. Something—just there, beyond that nearest great bole—staring at him. Pale, immobile, but with eyes that had caught a glint of light for just a moment. Eyes. A head, now, as he concentrated on it. He felt no fear at all, just intense curiosity. What was it? He separated shape from shadow, slowly. A head, with the dark shadow of short hair, flat and moist in curls. Nostrils and a chin, a mouth. Neck and shoulder and an arm. All pale, a kind of greeny cream, which could be an effect of the light. But humanoid! He held his breath in amazement, astonishment and delight all at once. Definitely a human shape as far as he could see in the deceptive light. Cowering behind a tree and watching him. Possibly as amazed and astonished as he was. Query itched in his mind with a vast wonder. Not the wonder of how anything humanlike came to be here at all. There the creature was, and that was enough.

But what *kind* of creature was it. Human in shape; it moved cautiously now, an arm, elbow and hand coming to rest on the tree bole . . . definitely a humanoid. But what did it think, if anything? What dreams and hopes and fears?

What must you think of me, in this crazy suit? he thought. *I wish you could talk, and I could understand.*

A rivulet of sweat ran into his eyes, blinding him for a moment, and when he was free of tears again—it was gone. Another mind would have sent the idea packing as illusion, but Query never even thought about it.

I'll be back, he thought, saying it in his mind. *I'll be back. We have to meet again, somehow. Tell your friends.* And he flicked another glance at his register and swore. He had undercut his time. Now he would have to scramble faster than ever before to get back there before his lung-pack quit on him. It wasn't easy to hurry in this murk. He took the line and reeled it over his left hand and elbow as he followed it back through mud and rioting creeper, around huge boles, crashing through thick shrubs, and in one spot stuck for several minutes while he argued with a snakelike root that had intimately entwined itself around the line. Precious minutes went away. He

floundered on, sweat streaming into his eyes and his incoming air growing hot and foul as the lung-pack labored through its last few resources. The filters would be solid now, the power pack feeble. He felt the liquid of his own sweat filling up inside the suit as he shambled on, whooping for breath, half-blind with sweat. And then, suddenly, the mud was less and the ground under his feet had a crust. And there was the Dome, looming grayly out of the mist. He hit the air lock button and leaned against the wall, fumbled at the snap hook on his line as the hatch cycled open and out, staggered inside and waited while it shut again, saw the eye-twisting blue of U.V. come on and heard the air pumps kick in. A minute more, and he could lever his helmet back and breathe gustily, gratefully, and then tear at the Velcro seals of his suit and peel it off.

"That was close!" he muttered, shivering as the dry air sucked away the sweat from his bare body. "Too close. Sergeant Keast ever got to hear, he might put the ban on." And that was a sobering thought. He turned the suit inside out to clean itself, took his one piece, snug fit, disposable uniform suit from the hook where he'd left it, climbed into it, grabbed the depleted lung-pack, and then leaned on the inner switch to set the door cycling open. This would be the worst time to be forbidden his pleasure jaunts outside, now that he had found humanoids out there. The first thing to come through the doorway at him was noise, above all the noise of Sergeant Keast's file hard voice halfway through a familiar indoctrination speech.

". . . assigned your work details immediately after chow-time, which is five minutes from now and lasts thirty minutes, at which time you will fall in again here, which is known as the assembly area, and I'll give you the rest of the rundown at that time, to which you will pay attention, but hear this. I will be the last to arrive. I better be. Dismissed!"

New arrivals. Query wasn't curious about them or anything else to do with Sergeant Keast. Just the sound of that voice, with its machinelike monotonous grind, was enough to banish forever any faint imaginings he may have had about telling anybody what he had seen out there. He went away as inconspicuously as possible, heading for stores. But not furtively enough.

"Query!" The penetrating squeal made him halt, turn, and pick up his feet to double across to where Keast waited for him.

"You been outside again!"

The lung-pack over his shoulder made it obvious and no comment was called for, but Query said, mildly, "I do have your permission, Sergeant, on my own time."

"Don't remind me. In fact, don't say anything to anybody about it. Return that pack to stores and get on over to the commandant's office right away. The P.A.'s been shouting for you for the past ten minutes!"

"For me?" Query was jarred out of his usual reserve. "Why me?"

Keast contorted his leatherlike face into what he probably thought was a smile. "You're shipping out, of course. What else?"

"Shipping out?" Query was stunned, and Keast's smile died.

"I don't read you, Query. Sixty-two men on this dump. Sixty-eight, now. And I would have bet every damned one of them, including me, would give a year's pay and an arm just to get off the place. But not you. Trust you to be different! Here, gimme that pack. I'll stow it. Get going, Instrumentman, before you're on a charge for keeping the commandant waiting. Get!"

Query saluted mechanically and departed at a heavy trot, his mind in chaos over this shocking news. New arrivals meant a ship in, also meant a possible "end of sentence" for some others, so Keast's deduction was legitimate. But Query prayed it was wrong. Especially now. Just suppose, though, that he was right. Wild thoughts crossed his mind. "Permission to refuse the transfer, sir!" "Why?" "I like it here, sir!" Even in the theater of his own mind that dialogue sounded unreal. Commander Eldredge would think him crazy, and he would indeed be shipped out, probably under heavy escort! And there was no more time for miserable apprehension. He reached Eldredge's door, rapped, and went in on the call. Commander Eldredge stood alongside his desk, and someone else sat in the seat of power. Query trod up to the commander glumly, saluted.

"Instrumentman Query, sir. You sent for me."

Eldredge gave him a beaky-nosed glare, a nod, then

wheeled to the man in the chair. "This is your man, Admiral. Do you want me to stay?"

"That's all right, Eldredge. Go and see about chow. I'll join you later. This won't take long and I would rather do it alone. Oh, and pass the word along to your servicing detail. I want that ship of mine ready to lift in an hour. Not less!"

Eldredge went away, leaving Query face to face with the one man he liked least in all the world. That well-remembered "rocks in a bucket" voice, the astonishing mane of white hair, the jutting eyebrows and blue cold eyes, the pompous red face and overbearing manner, the dazzle of gold braid on a black suit that betrayed the bulge and sag of a flabby, old man. Admiral Gareth—Gravel Guts—Evans.

Query stared for one breath, then lifted his eyes to stare ahead, and saw, off to one side, discreetly in the background, the slim and erect figure of an aide, a lieutenant with a loop of braid from one epaulet to belt line. One breath more, to see that "it" was a female, her black uniform skintight, tailored to show off her arrogantly jutting bosom and slim waist, her carved profile and bleak eye disdaining his stare. Then Evans cleared his throat.

II

"STEPHEN QUERY, Instrumentman, First Class." The old man stated it as if reading from a record. "Posted here to Step Two six months ago. You know who I am, Query?"

"Yes, sir."

"You were charged with insolence and insubordination and other conduct considered to be prejudicial to discipline and good order."

"None of the charges was substantiated, sir."

"Silence! Those charges were substantial, Query. Perhaps not in the official jargon, but in fact they were. In the mind of every Service officer present at your court-martial you were guilty as hell!"

"Of what, sir?" Query demanded, and the red face opposite him grew redder and savage.

"Of what you are doing right now, damnit! Arguing. Doubting. Violating the spirit of the Service. Perhaps there was no crime, not in black and white rule and regulation, but your attitude, your whole way of thinking is and was offensive to the underlying ethos of the Service. Man, you can't run an efficient Service unless you have instant and unquestioning obedience at all times!"

"Even when the given order is obviously and destructively wrong, sir?"

"That has nothing whatever to do with it, Query!" Evans was snorting now, as if trying to breathe fire. "That is somebody else's responsibility, not yours!" Query let it go. This had all been hashed over before, was a dead issue. He wondered what Evans was leading up to, and then it came.

"However," the old man said, in a slightly milder tone, "it has since come to my attention that the person with whom you had your argument, your superior officer—in name, at least—is, in fact, a stupid, blundering and incompetent fool. He has been stripped, and there are inquiries in hand designed to reveal how he ever got where he was; the fools who put him in that rank will regret it. I considered it my duty to inform you of that, and I have done so. Well?"

Query frowned at the ruddy face before him. What did the old fool want now, gratitude? "I don't know what to say, sir. I can't see how the action you describe has anything to do with me, sir."

"Right! Nothing at all to do with you. But it has to do with me. Query, I know something of what the rank and file think of me, and it doesn't bother me in the least. I've never tried to be popular. Not my job. But I do claim, and like to think, that I am a fair man. I made an error. It is human to make errors, Query, and I am human, no matter what you may have heard to the contrary. I made a mistake, and I have admitted it to you. Had I known what a blasted incompetent fool Lieutenant Rostov was, your case would have ended differently. As it is, I am out one technician lieutenant, and one highly competent instrumentman is wasting his skill here. I have examined your records. You are more than competent. It is in my power, and it is my decision, that you are, as of now, Technical

Sergeant Query. Understood? I heard your chow bell just now. Go and eat, then pack your kit and be on my ship before I lift off!"

Query gulped. "Sir? Your ship?"

"Not as crew, man! It's not a blasted battleship! It's my staff transport. You'll be a passenger. I'm on my way to the war zone. I only stopped off here for a quick check, to drop off six replacements . . . and to collect you. You'll be posted properly, Sergeant, when I turn you over to Fleet Admiral Nimson's H.Q. Is that clear?"

It was all too clear, and disastrous. Query gulped. "Sir!" It came out choked and he tried again, desperately. "Sir!"

"Now what?"

"Sir, is there any way in which I can request permission to—to refuse the appointment, sir?"

"Blast my eyes, you're doing it again!" Evans purpled, hit the desk with a fist. "Get out of here. Get your chow. Get your kit. Get yourself aboard my ship. Report yourself to my aide, Lieutenant Evans, here. Do it like that, or God help you! I mean that, Sergeant! Now get!"

Query got. Shocked into a daze, he found his seat at the meal table and ate mechanically, unaware of the taste, half hearing the chatter about his ears. For once in his life his mind failed to work. Always, until the Service had reached out and captured him, he had been able to think his way over and around anything and anyone, had been able to stay indifferent to the puerile play of other people. Space Service had changed that, had screwed him down into a slot where he couldn't wriggle out, had *made* him be involved, like it or not, and had hurt him severely many times. "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" had been hard sometimes, but this dwarfed all the rest. A quiet obscurity, an exciting secret all his own, and it was all to be ripped out of his grasp—and there was nothing he could do!

"Old Gravel Guts has his nerve, you have to admit!" The nearby speaker caught Query's stunned ear, set him listening.

"That old adjective doesn't have nerves!" someone else disagreed. "Look at it. Every last man in this dump hates his insides, and he knows it, and yet he jets in here, bold

as brass, and drops off six more men. And you can guess the trip they had. That bucket of his rates four, all told!"

"And then," somebody else chimed in, "he has the plastic-lined gall to demand a full service check out in an hour! Nerve? He ain't even human!"

"Me, I'd like to stuff a warhead up his stern tubes. Man, would he ever lift off then!" There came a general chuckle, not mirthful, until one more voice piped up.

"He's human, all right. You should take a good look at that aide of his and you'd know why he's in such a blazing rush to get on his way. She is built like every dame I ever dreamed of and then some!"

"She?" there came an unbelieving chorus, and then another voice, slow and cynical, full of conviction.

"She's a she, all right. I was on the tube when they came inboard. And she has the giant economy size of everything you dream about. And she knows it, too. But you can have my ration of that any time."

"Fussy in your old age, Ham?"

"Just careful, Buggsy. She's his daughter. If you want to fool around with a chip off that old block, you can have mine."

The badinage went away as Query remembered. The old man had said "Lieutenant Evans" sure enough. His pilot-aide. His daughter. It was a safe bet she'd never won her commission the hard way. And the old devil had the nerve to call himself a *fair* man? Somehow, that touch of cynicism put the capper on Query's helplessness, dropped him to the nadir of despair. He finished eating and went to pack, not a long job at all. And he had no one to call friend, to say good-bye to, no one to give a damn as he made his way through the workshop dome and to the service tube. As he shook his duffel bag onto his shoulder and stooped to enter, there was one who came close to touch his arm. A lean and wild-looking power man he knew only by sight, and the name, Michaels.

"Instrumentman! You got a job detail on that ship?"

"Do I look like I'm on a work detail?"

"No. I guess not. But why else would you be going aboard?"

Deep down inside, Query had a primitive savagery that he was ashamed of and usually able to control, but it

burst out now. "Would you believe Admiral Evans is giving me a lift out to the war zone, so I can get in the fighting?"

The reaction that came was not what he expected. Michaels looked suddenly stricken. "You wouldn't fool a guy, would you?"

"No," Query sighed, his rage going as fast as it had come. "No, I'm not fooling. I got an honorable forgiveness, and I'm on my way to Alkaid in that ship. Why?"

"Nothing." Michaels grew suddenly furtive. "Forget it. I don't know you. Nothing!" And he went away, leaving Query to frown, shake his head, and then duck into the tube along its concertina length to the air lock. His experience of ships was slight, and he had never seen one this small before. It took him a moment to get his bearings. Probably somebody's private yacht, before the war. People had private lives before the war, too. Like Query, who had been a designer, architect, artist and dreamer, with little success in any but the last. Not now. He shrugged, went up a ladder, then another, and he was in the control room, a small and compact space like an upturned pudding basin. The roof was a dome of glassite with titanium panel shutters. The small space was packed with instruments in panels and boxes, and there were three seats. And one occupant.

Seen this close, she was definitely female. Her black, one piece suit fitted like paint over a shape that was studied insolence, blatantly exhibitionist, swelling close to him as she turned, but the gold braid on wrist and shoulder put him in his place and her level, brown-eyed stare kept him there coldly. She had to put her head back to look him in the eye, but she still conveyed the impression of looking down her nose at him.

"Technical Sergeant Query," she acknowledged his presence and her grasp of the situation crisply, "we have a moment or two before lift-off. Stow your duffel in cabin four and then check over the engine space. Make sure none of your repair and maintenance colleagues have left anything undone or bits sculling about. Give a special look at the second stage heat exchangers. They were reading high when we came down. I reported that. It should have been dealt with. Check it!"

Query attempted a salute, clumsily because of his slung kit bag, and her mouth tightened in scorn.

"How much ship time have you done, Query?"

"None, sir . . . ma'am. Except in transit from one base to another."

"I see!" She clasped her hands at her back and expanded her breasts even fuller as she stared up at him. "Very well. Learn. When speaking to, or being spoken to by an officer, you stand to attention whenever possible. You do not salute. Not inboard. You do not wear a cap except in special circumstances, formal circumstances. You stow your cap, or tuck it under the left arm, peak forward, until such time as you are able to stow it. Don't forget it. That's all!"

"Yes, ma'am." Query overrode the twitch in his arm, wheeled and went away, down ladders, past the air lock and on down, to a boxlike cabin-flat where he tossed his bag in the cupboard-sized space numbered Four, and on down again to the cell-sized engine deck. Anger burned dully in him. Snotty female. He would have liked the chance to turn her over his knee and paddle her hard. A chip off the old block, sure enough. But that dull resentment went away as he surveyed the jewellike precision of the machines around him. Strictly, he was seeing only the top ends, the access covers which were spread in a tight circle around the central trunking. The monsters themselves went away down there in a world all their own and did wonderful things. Smooth, precise, functional things. Not like people, who had no regular pattern, who were full of irrelevancies like whims and emotions and opinions.

He moved admiringly around the narrow catwalk, studying the layout, figuring out each piece of the instruments, which were the parts he really knew well. Lubrication pressures and temperatures; power storage and discharge rates; air plant, humidity, temperature, rate of flow; fuel flow; main drive; heat exchange, first and second stage. He ran his fingers over the quick lock bolts, the flanges, and felt roughened edges, the fresh tackiness of sealing compound. Something had been done, that was all he could be sure of without tools. It wasn't his job anyway. He moved on, making sure that nothing had been left half-done, no

wrenches or scrap lying about, and his eye fell on a curious box, something new in his experience.

It was tucked away between two breaker boxes, and had a glassite cover, and a brass plate so well worn and polished that it was only because he caught a side light on it that he realized there was print on it. He frowned at it, put his head on one side until the lettering was clear.

CANOPY EJECT TEST AND RESET.

Query scowled at it, digging into his memory. Eject? It rang a faint bell. He peered again, seeing more print in lower case.

"Break switch before testing canopy eject system. Authorized personnel only."

It took him another minute before he could connect up his memories. And it took him a long way back. This must be a really old ship. Explosive, safety eject systems had long ago been made obsolete. For one thing, it was close to impossible for a modern micropile to blow, and if ever one did, it would be so fast that no possible safety device would be any use. Whoever had reengined this craft for war service had either missed that or had left it in place rather than go to the trouble of ripping out the circuitry. It couldn't possibly work.

A bell dinged gently, jerking him out of his reverie to see the fuel pump gauges shiver and lift and the drive flux density start to climb from zero. He went up out of there fast, dropping the hatch behind him, and all the way back up to the control room. Lieutenant Evans was in the seat of authority, her slim hands on the levers, her eyes on her panel. Admiral Evans was over to one side at the radio board, slumped in his seat, lifting his head from the microphone as Query entered.

"Sit!" he snapped. "We're about to lift. D'you want to rupture yourself? Sit!"

Query dropped into the third seat, opposite the engine complex board, as the weight came on, squashing him down into the foam, making him grunt.

"Engine room checked out, sir," he said, panting. "Looks all in good order to me, sir."

"Shut up! GOC to Step Two. We have lift-off plus ten. Beacon acquisition affirmative. GOC over and out!"

Query saved his breath. He needed it. It was effort just

to inflate his chest as the crushing weight grew. Either this ship had a lot more get up and go than anything he had ridden so far, or the pilot was showing off. He suspected the latter. He could see her board over her shoulder. It was a novel experience for him to see instruments actually in action. On the test bench he knew them all, what they did and how, but now the tale they told was real, not just a drill. Rate of climb was trembling into the red. Horizon, horizontal and vertical, steady and solid. Beacon acquisition was a three-point reading that should keep the ship standing straight up inside a triangular grid. That beacon took power, lots of it. Nothing so frail as an ordinary radio signal had a hope of smashing its way through this soupy atmosphere. Nor was it easy for the ship. He saw the thrust in megadynes, shivering well over into the maximum range, and had a mental picture of the bullet-shaped ship boring its way up, squandering power, yet leaning hard on that same thick atmosphere to conduct away the furious heat involved. The atmosphere aided the heat exchangers, making it easier than normal for them. And his attention came alive suddenly and urgently on those dials.

The needles were galloping up and over far too fast. As he stared in disbelief they hit maximum and shivered against the stops. It was insane! A flicked glance at the screens confirmed what he knew anyway, that they were still in atmosphere. And the drive was hot. Too hot, dangerously too hot! Here came the second stages, cutting in automatically. But uselessly. They were expansion exhaust, designed for the near vacuum of space, and worse than useless here. He squandered breath and effort to shout, "We are overheating! Cut the drive! The drive!"

"Don't be a fool!" Lieutenant Evans snapped. "I can't cut drive! We are ten miles up!"

"Then ease off!" he shouted, fighting his way out of his seat and to her side, to cling to her seat arm and aim a lead heavy arm at the gauges. The second stage heaters were fairly leaping over the quadrant. "She'll blow any time at those temperatures!"

"What the hell!" the old man roared, and Query labored around to shout at him, and saw, over his head, on the bulkhead up there, the duplicate of that glassed-in box he

had seen down there in the engine space. Eject switch. He immediately forgot all else, groaned away from her chair, labored over to Evans like a drunken man, and hurled himself up and on top of the roaring admiral, deaf to everything but the urge to get at that box. He reached it, beat at it with crazy fists, and the glassite cover came away and fell to reveal a red handgrip. There was no time to wonder what or how. He grabbed it, tugged at it, tried to twist it one way or the other, heaved madly . . . and it came away in his hand.

Oh my god! he thought. I've broken it!

Then the whole control room bucked violently as if battered by a huge hammer. It went instantly and absolutely dark, and from a long way off came the whiplash and echoing boom of an explosion. Then sudden and complete silence. Darkness. Weightlessness. And then the first faint wailing of tortured atmosphere.

III

WE'VE BLOWN FREE! he thought, pushing his arms out at random in the dark, his right hand still holding the handle. We're free, and falling! Ten miles up!

A bellow somewhere near told him that Admiral Evans was still functioning after a fashion.

"What the hell's happening? What's wrong with the lights? Christine! Why the blazes are we in free . . . ?"

The angry bellowing cut off short as there came an enormous, eye-hurting, sear white flare that filled the control room with harsh and stark light. Query saw the black lines of the canopy frame like some giant spider's web. One figure in silhouette floated between him and it, thrashing and flailing, and he knew it was Lieutenant Evans. The edges and dials of the panels were razor sharp in that light. Everything seemed to happen in funereal slowness, as if time itself had gone wrong. The fearful glare seemed to blink, to go momentarily away, and then come back intensified, unbearably bright, and swiftly changing to a hellish, blazing red.

The drive had blown. He knew that much. What would have been either impossible or instantly fatal in space had been so damped by this thick atmosphere as to give them that scanty time margin for escape. But there had to be a shock wave, and soon. He scrambled frantically in mid-air, trying to orient toward the light, the glare, the glassite canopy. The air around him shivered, and there came a gigantic booming roar that grew louder and louder until he felt his head had to burst. The canopy came to meet him fast, and he struck it on knees and flat hands, jarringly, as the scarlet flare winked out. Gasping from the pain in his knees and arms, he tried to lever himself up from the shatterproof glassite. And it wasn't there anymore. He was free floating again. He cringed, wondering what he would hit next. Free floating inside the control room like a pea in a dark pod. He felt sick, extended nervous arms and legs, ached in anticipation, and heard again the starting wail of rushing air. Falling.

He caught something soft and resilient, clung to it; and it in turn seized him and clung crazily, painfully. Before he could form words there came a distant, faint whip crack of sound, and then another, louder and closer . . . and the lights came on, dull-flaring sodium emergency lights, just in time to show him the steel deck coming to meet him. And the hazard of panel blocks. And Lieutenant Evans clutching him in terror, ghostlike in the yellow glare. And then the bone-jarring smash against the floor, that seemed to shake loose the very teeth in his head and fire his whole body with pain. He lay absolutely still for a long, dazed moment, feeling heavy and hurt, willing to die now and put an end to it.

Then something soft stirred under his hands. He groped, lifted his head to peer in the glare. She wasn't arrogant now. She was flat on her back and still, her eyes oddly glinting, until he craned over and saw they were covered by curiously shaped plastic. Stupidly he sorted out his tumbled memories until he had unearthed the old word—spectacles—a contrivance of optical plastic worn to correct vision defects. Old-fashioned, long abandoned, lately revived as a "fashion" symbol. He felt hysteria pushing at his throat. A weakness! This overblown, superior female had a weakness, a defect. She couldn't see straight!

A measure of sanity came back, cutting away his light-headedness. Was she dead? He touched her, ripped at the black stuff to free her bosom, laid his palm on her full breast and couldn't be sure whether he felt the slam of her heart or his own. She heaved a great breath and groaned, and he drew back, trying to crouch on legs that screamed in protest. Trying to think. Looking about in the foul yellow glare that dazzled but hardly illuminated. A black bulk over there between the seats had to be the old man. Weight. He had weight, and the control room was the correct way up. That had to mean something, if only he could shake the bells out of his head and figure out what. He stirred, wincing again at the ache in his knees, and saw Lieutenant Evans stir and sit up. She seemed to goggle at him through the transparent windows in front of her eyes, her ample breasts spilling out of her open uniform and heaving as she breathed.

Eject, he thought. Explosive clearance. Safety device . . . and weight. Falling, but with weight? And it came to him. Parachutes! Of course! He felt immediately better until he tried to spring up, and groaned as his knees protested and the sweat sprang out on his brow. He grabbed a seat arm and clung to it, painfully easing himself around and into it. Falling. But for how long? How far? He levered his head around to see her trying to get up, forced himself from his seat and over to lean, to offer his hand.

"Take it easy," he mumbled. "Anything broken?"

"I don't—think so!" she gasped in a breath, clung to his arm, got unsteadily to her feet. "What happened? What's wrong with the lights?"

"Emergency sodiums," he said. "You'd better sit down. I think we're falling. On parachutes." She leaned on his arm, found her seat and slumped into it, staring dazedly up at him. Before she could grasp what he had said there came a snort and cough, and he swung away, staggered to where the old man was fighting his way up between the other two seats. His cap had gone somewhere and his hair was a bristle halo, his face stained and streaked with blood that looked black in the light.

"Here!" Query gave him an arm. "Better get into a seat. We're falling. Parachutes!"

"Eh? Oh! All right. I can make it. Christ, my head!"

What the hell did we hit, eh?" Evans collapsed into the seat, shook his head carefully, growled and looked around. "Emergencies? What? Just a minute! The bloody ship blew. Didn't it? I saw it. Seen that before. Direct hit!"

"No, sir." Query felt tired. "That wasn't it!"

"What? Damnit man! I've seen ships hit before . . ." the angry growl faded as the old man's memory asserted itself. Query sighed.

"Not here, sir. We're hardly away from Step Two yet. There wouldn't be a missile here. The drive overheated and blew. The heat exchangers . . . ?"

In his own mind Query knew, positively, that it had not been that simple. He knew now what had made Michaels stop him—try to stop him—the ship had been deliberately and efficiently sabotaged. But there was nothing to gain now by telling the old man that somebody had seized a chance to pay off old scores. There was nothing to be gained by anything, anyhow, any time, not now. They were all dead. Query knew that, too, with positive assurance, and the knowledge made him curiously indifferent.

"I don't understand." Evans mumbled, shaking his head. "The drive couldn't blow just like that. We'd all be dead!"

"There was something wrong with the heat exchangers. But we were in atmosphere. That slowed it down a little."

"He's right, sir!" Lieutenant Evans rotated her seat to report. She looked stark pale in the ghastly light but was obviously regaining something of her control. "The heat exchangers did go wild. I saw that. I would say we are extremely lucky to be alive. I don't quite understand how."

"That was me." Query eyed them curiously. "I pulled the emergency eject switch. I had to scramble over you to do it, sir. Remember?"

Evans put a shaky hand to his head. "I recall something like that. Wondered what the hell you were doing. Thought you'd gone off your head. Eject switch? I didn't even know we had one. You, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir. I never heard of anything like that. Emergency eject?"

"It's an obsolete fitting, sir." Query stifled the urge to

laugh. A lecture on ship design, now? "They ceased fitting them years ago. This must be a very old ship."

"Damn it, you're right there, Query!" Evans sat up a little straighter in his seat. "Used to be a private yacht. Belonged to Oberth Steinlander. Donated it to the war drive. Good thing you spotted that. Saved our lives. We wouldn't be here now!" He snorted, then scratched his head again. "But where the hell are we, anyway?"

"That I don't know," Query admitted. "We're falling, and we have weight, so it seems reasonable to assume we're on parachutes. But that's the lot."

"What about you, Lieutenant? Any estimates?"

Query turned to watch her, mildly amazed at the militarism that held their minds, even now. Discipline! Efficiency! He wanted to laugh again.

"It's not easy, sir," she frowned. "Very little to go on. We were just ten miles up, the last readings I saw. It's anybody's guess how far we were thrown by the eject, and by the blast. Or how fast we're falling, for that matter. I've no references, sir."

"Hmml!" The old man was reverting to pattern visibly with every passing second. "Not out of the woods yet, eh? Bumpy landing ahead? But that's a minor matter. We're all alive and whole. Nothing broken!" He paused to lower his brows and scowl at her. "Button up, Lieutenant!" He jabbed a finger and she stared down at her generous exposure in sudden consternation, swiveled her seat around and made repairs. Evans stared at Query. "It won't take long for a search party to locate us. Just a matter of sit tight and hang on, eh? Smart thinking on your part, Sergeant, to spot that eject system. And use it. I will see that it is duly mentioned in the right places; you can count on that."

"Yes, sir." Query said, but there was no heart in it. In his mind the big picture had opened out in detail, filling in and underlining his first assumption that they were dead already, all three. There were details that Evans didn't know, couldn't know, nor would he understand if told, not all of them. Take the base, for instance. So far as Step Two was concerned, the staff ship had gone away, straight up on the beacon. That was all they could know. Radar ears could pick up a little through that soup but not much. Enough to know when a ship was coming in. Pos-

sibly enough to follow a ship on the way out, but why would they bother. And even if they had, just out of curiosity, and even if they had detected the explosion and tried to guess what it was, they would automatically assume that the ship and contents were lost. With varying emotions, depending on who was doing the feeling, they would write off one staff ship, one unloved admiral, one lieutenant, and one recently promoted technical sergeant. All dead.

As for a search party, well, Evans obviously had no idea at all just what that atmosphere out there was like. Completely enclosed in a suit, a man could endure for as long as his lung-pack would hold him. Four hours. Two hours out and two back. And if you got more than a mile away from the Dome in that time, you were doing extremely well. Query sagged in his seat, wondering at the primitive survival instinct that had driven him to pull the emergency switch. How frail the barrier was between intellect and the push of animal instinct! Sitting like this, passably calm, he could contemplate death with indifference, although it might have been faster, more merciful if he had kept still before. But should another explosive moment come, he mused, he would probably do something like that all over again. Flesh and blood, glands and guts, they ruled in the crunch.

"Don't we have any outside sensors at all?" Evans growled, stirring Query out of his reverie. "Strikes me we ought to have *something* on battery power. Air-conditioning, if nothing else. It's like a furnace in here!"

It *was* hot. Query felt the sweat trickling down his face and chest. But the mention of battery power stirred something else in his mind.

"My instruments are all dead, sir." Lieutenant Evans was turned away still, leaning over her panel. She craned her head around now. "Sergeant, would you know if there's any way of switching to emergency power?"

"Might be." Query rose, his suit sticking to him, and went to lean over her shoulder, noticing that she had undone her front again, that the white globes of her breasts were sheeny with sweat. More primitive instincts, he thought, as he reached past her and moved a switch or two, pushing her hand aside. "Three position switches," he murmured.

"That has to mean something. That's power. That's off. So . . ." and he twisted the switch backward, to hear it click, to see a needle lift and shiver. "That seems to be it . . ."

The control room lurched suddenly, throwing him against her so that he had to grab to keep his balance. And to let go again, hurriedly.

"Atmospheric turbulence," he muttered. "You have an airspeed reading now. And outside temperature. Nothing on direction. No, that's dead. No lift or thrust readings, either. But the proximity gauges work, see?"

"Thank you." She tilted her head back to smile at him, and she was very close, very inviting, so that he had a wild urge to touch her . . . and her eyes were suddenly fathomless brown wells under the transparent plastic of her spectacles. Then the control room bucked and lurched and swung, and the moment passed. He staggered back to his seat and fell into it.

"So far as I can read them," she sounded unsteady, "the outside temperatures are crazy, in the nineties. Must be friction. Guessing between airspeed and the proximity gauges, we seem to be falling at about eighteen/twenty miles per hour, with about a mile to go . . ."

The derelict bounced again and spun crazily. Query hung on, saw her shove back from her panel with blood suddenly streaming from her nose. Pain and suffering, he thought, and abundant beauty . . . and all for nothing. He saw her grope in an upper pocket of the tunic top that gaped free to get out a tissue and dab at her nose. So futile and purposeless. What a way to die! He recalled his earlier promise—it seemed a lifetime away now—*I'll be back*. That strange humanlike creature, out there in the jungle. He would never know, now. And that was the real loss. Not death, but the end of knowing. So many things he had never done or seen or known; whole areas of life left untouched. He wondered if she felt anything like that? She looked to be about his age, within a year or two, and there probably were all kinds of things she had never seen or done, too. But, he ridiculed himself, she wouldn't think of it, because she didn't know, yet, that she was dead!

"This is all rather pointless, sir." She'd found an edge for

her voice from somewhere. "I've only indications, none too reliable. No kind of operational controls at all. We're quite helpless to do anything except watch and wait for it."

"That's what I said," Evans growled. "All we have to do. Just hang on. Ride it out."

"Yes, sir. We should touch down in about a minute from now!"

"Shed some of this damned heat. Like an oven in here!"

"Getting close," she warned, turning her head . . . and a monstrous hammer hit the deck under them. Query sank, winded, into his seat, grunting against the impact. The lights winked out. In the dark came the squeal and grind of tortured metal and plastic. He surged upward as the weight went away for a moment, then sagged back again. Everything seemed to have torn loose and be bouncing around, even the control room itself, creating a bedlam of noise to which Evans added his roaring protest. Query clutched his seat frantically. It felt as if it was rocking under him like a seesaw. Then came a teeth-chilling creak, a crack like doom, and the sudden hissing roar of water. Query gasped as hot spray struck his face and brought strange and pungent smells with it. His seat lurched, tossing him forward across the power panel console. Hot water smashed down on his head, making him gasp again, and struggle frantically to get clear, to draw back and stand, knee-deep in water. Hot water!

There was a faint blue green glow through the canopy, enough to let him see that the glassite had split or burst under impact and that dark water was spurting in.

"We're sinking!" Lieutenant Evans scrambled out of her seat and clung to his arm fearfully. "We're sinking! We have to get out!" Her voice was shrill over the roar of water and her clutch desperate.

"How?" he shouted back at her. "All the hatches are self-sealing . . . and they're underwater anyway, by now!"

"Through the roof!" Evans roared. "Have to break it and get out that way! Need a bar, something to bash with!" He looked wildly about, grabbed at a scribble table that stood by the radio board on a single upright pole, and tried to tear it loose by main force. That got him nowhere. Query watched, again in that curiously indifferent mood. He was marginally aware of the girl who clung to his

arm, irrelevantly puzzled that no vapor came from water so hot—but of course, the air temperature was just as high—and he saw Evans sweat and strain and go scarlet in the face.

"Try unscrewing it, sir!" he called, and the old man grunted, twisted savagely, and the tabletop spun, came free and dropped with a splash into the water. Waist deep now. Evans wrestled with the tube, got it free and in his fist, brandishing it like a symbol of triumph. A titanium alloy tube not quite five feet long, tough but feather light. A fat lot of good he was going to do with that! Query watched him scramble unsteadily up on the radio console, swaying against the roll of the water, to poise and jab up at the dim green glassite. All he got was a noise. Snarling, he drew back and did it again, harder. With the same negative result. Furious, he took the tube in both hands, half turned to where the glassite sloped, took aim and swung, clouting the panel fair and square.

Query winced in sympathy as the tube rebounded and spun away out of the old man's grasp, glinting in the blue green glow. Almost without thought he stuck out his hand and caught the thing, as Evans teetered, flailed the air, and fell backward with a mighty splash into the water. The girl threw herself at him urgently, angrily.

"Aren't you going to *do* anything?" she screamed.

"No. Not yet. Not until we've settled below the level of that split, below the inflow. Then we might have a chance to swim out."

Her face set into stark terror as she stared up at him. "But—but I can't swim!" she cried. "I can't swim!"

IV

HE TOOK HER SHOULDERS, pushed her away to stare at her in wonder. Her dark hair was plastered down over her head and framed her pale face; the absurd spectacles still miraculously clinging, bridging her nose; the swirling water now coming up under her breasts, lifting them as she panted in fear.

"You can't swim," he said, and wanted to laugh. The ultimate absurdity. The origin of all life—didn't they say that?—in the sea. And she couldn't swim! He shoved her away, heard the old man snorting and spluttering his way to his feet and turned to him.

"We're settling fast," he said, and it was true. The inrush of water was no more than a turbulence over there. "We have a trapped air pocket here that ought to keep us up awhile. Not for long, but enough to give us a chance to swim out. Can you swim?"

"Eh?" Evans wiped water away from his face and blew hard. "That damned tube's no good. No weight to it. Couldn't dent the stuff."

"I said, can you swim?"

"Eh? Swim? Yes, a bit. Not very good at it. Never had much time . . . eh? Oh! By God! See what you mean. Duck under and swim clear, eh? All right, it's the only way. Hot as hell in here. Be a relief to get in the open. Off you go, Christine. Get well clear, mind. There'll be a hell of an undertow when this thing goes under."

But she hung back, staring at the water that lapped her, breast deep, and then at the two men. "I can't swim!" she wailed. "I can't!"

"Get a grip on yourself!" her father shouted. "You can hold your breath, can't you? Duck under, can't you?"

"I can't!" she screamed back at him. "I can't!"

She was almost off balance. Query could guess her panic, could see her gasping fear. Her father lurched at her, putting out his hand, and she backed, toppled and went under with a shriek and splutter, to thrash her way to the surface and shriek again in terror. Evans splashed around to glower at Query in disgust.

"What the hell are we going to do with her?"

"You go on ahead, sir. Let me handle it. She'll be all right. I can swim well enough for both of us."

The old man hung on uncertainly, glancing from one to the other. She backed away again, fearfully, lifting herself up in the water as if scared to go under again, her breasts heaving violently. There was no time now for delicacy. Query could swim, had been fond of the sport ever since he could remember, but no one was good enough to dive and get out through that hole with a struggling

nonswimmer to cope with. There was only one way. He moved toward her gently, held out the alloy tube in one hand. "Here," he said quietly, "catch hold of this. It will help."

She took it suspiciously, and he pulled her to him, then swung his right fist around and over in a hard glancing blow that bounced off her jaw and put her out instantly. Carrying on the movement, he caught her and crooked his arm about her shoulders to hold her up.

"All right, sir," he said, as matter-of-factly as he could. "Away you go now. We'll be all right. I'll take care of it."

Evans grunted. "Damn all females. Thought she was efficient! All right, here I go!" and he sucked in a huge breath and ducked under, heading for the hole, thrashing the water with more effort than achievement. Query waited, cradling the girl against his shoulder, part of his mind marveling at the persistent effort, the instinctive struggle against the inevitable. She was quite beautiful like this, relaxed and unconscious, without those hard superior expression lines. And those ridiculous spectacles were still tenaciously there. Time enough, he thought, and the water was lapping his chin, so he drew a deep breath and took aim for the ripples, slid under and struck out with one arm, the flow serving to guide him.

The gap was narrow and angular, but big enough to let him slip through, turn, and hook her out after him; then up to the surface with strong kicks, dragging her by the tunic collar of her suit. Once clear of the water he shifted his grip, got his arm about her waist and hugged, suddenly, driving the breath out of her mouth and nose, just to make sure she didn't choke. Shifting his grip again he grabbed her collar once more, with the tube in the same fist, and began stroking away from the canopy bubble that loomed up in the water. In a moment he raised his voice.

"Hello! Admiral Evans! Hello!"

"Over here, Query. Can't see a damned thing in this green soup. Here. This way. All right?"

Query struck out steadily, was soon able to see the white hair and pale face of the old man. "We're all right, so far." He bobbed up in the water, looking about. The mist was surprisingly clear just here, close to the water surface. "That looks like darker stuff, that way," he said. "We might as

well make for it. Take it easy now, no hurry. Save your strength."

"In a fix!" Evans blew hard as he swam alongside. "Lost our mark . . . when that thing . . . goes down . . . can't see it . . . floating . . . can you?"

"Doubt it. All that metal, instruments, batteries. But the trapped air should hold it long enough for us to get clear."

"What I mean. With that gone . . . nothing to fix on . . . hell of a job . . . search party . . . finding just the three of us. Mustn't get . . . too far!"

"Let's get ashore, anyway." Query swam easily, almost enjoying himself. The darkness ahead might be shore, it didn't much matter. The air and water were just as hot as they had been inside, hotter, if anything, yet he felt easy, almost at home. The comedy wasn't over yet, seemingly. He spent a moment wondering where they were, until he realized the question meant nothing. There was no reference except Step Two. Nothing of the rest of the planet had been researched at all.

"Take it easy, sir, don't rush," he advised, and left Evans to his hopes and dreams of rescue, while he cast his mind back over what he knew of the planet. It wasn't much, but it was all on record, and he had read it just from curiosity. There had been one advance research party long before the war, who had orbited awhile, measured temperatures and masses, taken probe samples of the atmosphere, and declared the planet absolutely impossible for exploration, settlement or anything else human, just a dot on a map, a curiosity. But the war had rearranged that. Logistics. The need for somewhere to break the immensely long hop between Draconis and Alkaid, a dump for fuel and spares, and patch up repairs. And GOC Evans, and his bulldozer techniques. It was all in the record as a shining example of how to overcome the impossible.

Sling one enormous monitor tanker into orbit, her tanks full of fuel. Order four light cruisers to go down there, to jet down, tail first into the soup, and a bonus to the first one to scorch the murk down to bedrock. Burn a hole in the stuff, damnit! Do it again! Quarter the surface by numbers! There has got to be a solid surface down there somewhere! Find it! And, in time, they found it. And hung a marker above it. And then the ships went down, one

after another, squandering fuel recklessly, spouting fire, hovering until their tanks were almost empty and coming back up for more, and again, and again. Until there was an area down there of more than a square mile that was blasted, cooked, fried and fused down to the virgin rock. Then it was time for the heavy gang to move in and down, to spray quick set concrete, and plastic, and more concrete, more plastic, in layers until they had a foundation. And then the bubble domes to start with, and living units, and bigger domes; and then the repair and maintenance systems, fuel dumps, spares, and men, and the beacon . . . and the base, finally. And then Earth had a second stepping-stone between Moon Base and Alkaid for the more efficient promotion of the war.

One square mile on the whole of a planet surface that was virtually as big as Earth. The rest was dark mystery, totally unknown. Query swam on easily, trying to see some kind of poetic justice about the fact that the man who had been responsible for burning that sore into the planet's bosom should now be about to die in the midst of its wilderness. But there was something wrong with that. His daughter never had anything to do with it. And Query himself, far from fearing or defying the place, had actually grown to like it. There was no justice in that, surely?

He became aware of furtive movement against his arm, of weak struggle, and, too, of heavily labored breathing from his blind side. Evans panted, "Just about . . . all in . . . Query! Can't . . . keep on . . . anymore!"

"I told you to take it easy, didn't I? Hold it. Turn over on your back and float. Rest awhile. You'll be all right!" He rolled over himself and drew the girl close, passing his free arm under hers and holding her to him as she started to moan and struggle.

"You hold still, too," he ordered, close to her ear. "You've been all right up to now. No trouble, and you're quite safe, see? Understand?"

"Yes. I'll try. What do I do?"

"Nothing at all, for the moment. Just lie flat and easy. Not stiff. Easy, as if you were in bed. That's right; good!"

He smiled reassuringly down at her pale face in the water, and she tried to smile back at him.

"Admiral! Work your way over this way a bit. Right,

that's fine. Now, roll over again and float. Put your hands back under your head and feel this—the end of the pole—right? Hold on. Now you do it." He smiled at the girl again. "That's right. Feel the pole? Right, now you are quite safe. Your father's on the other end, and I'm in the middle, holding it up. Just relax, both of you."

He ducked under the pole to get himself pointed right, and used the moment to bob up high out of the water and look ahead. Distant but distinct, he saw dark columnar boles and uprights. Trees. So they were, after all, headed the right way. For what difference it made. As he sank down again his feet touched a sandy bottom.

I wonder how long that's been there? he thought. I could have walked it, maybe. But not the others, he amended quickly. He was a good three inches taller than Evans, and his chin was barely clear. Never mind, he dismissed it. It makes it a trifle easier, that's all.

He started to wade-walk, leaning into the water. Perhaps his vision had adapted considerably, but he felt he could see fugitive lights, very faintly, ahead. Possibly, or it could be the first insidious symptoms of death by poisoning. Or whatever it was that this air would do to an unprotected person. He pondered on that as he walked on. How soon would death come, and in what form? Death he could face readily, but dying was another matter, and it could be painful. But his information was scanty. That original research team had taken some samples of the atmosphere, enough to be able to say that it was literally swarming with bacteria, spores, microlife of every imaginable kind. It attacked and ate, voraciously, anything and everything they tried it on, except that one particular plastic. Query had done a few tests of his own, and could verify that. Chunks of rubber, odd bits of highly polished chrome steel and various alloys. Even glass. All rotted and crumbled before the hungry air. And it wasn't just corrosion, for a strong dose of ultraviolet was enough to destroy the effect. So it was life. Living spores.

He imagined them, by the uncountable million, passing in and out of his lungs right now, mingling with his sweat, nibbling at the soft lining of his mouth and throat, and felt a shudder of distaste. That would be a hideous way to go. Eaten alive! Forcing himself to be objective, he had

to admit he couldn't feel anything yet. But that was not significant.

Human tests, understandably, hadn't been done. But he did know of one case of two men, who, by accident and carelessness, had stepped out into the open, bent on an external welding job, with their helmets improperly set. Only for a minute or two. Someone else had spotted it and sent them back inside, fast. And those two men, anxiously watched by their fellows, had been fit and healthy for twenty-four hours, and then they had gone down with acute bellyache, vomiting, cramps and bloody discharge, to be prostrate and weak for several days, and then, by degrees, to get well again. And that after only a breath or two. He shivered again at the thought.

The water grew steadily and slowly shallower now, and he felt his feet stirring up mud. He was on the point of suggesting that his floating burden might just as well roll over and try walking it, when he felt the water about him tremble, and from far away there came a sudden, massive, slurping sound, a bursting, a huge wet explosion that echoed across the oily water.

"What the hell was that?" Evans grunted.

"The last of our derelict ship," Query answered, but his gaze was ahead and suddenly intent in amazement, for it was as if the sound wave, rushing on past him, had struck a vast hillside there and set it afire with washes of faint color, muted tinges of rainbow light. He was still staring, watching the miracle fade and die, when, out of the same enigmatic loom of land came a gargantuan sound, a monstrous gargling screech that shook the air and made his spine run chill. And the entire slope of land flared up in a glorious blaze of every color imaginable!

"What the hell was *that*?" Evans demanded, in a totally different tone of voice, as his daughter gave a terrified wail and started thrashing in the water. Query stared breathlessly, heedless of her struggles, as the wonderful rainbow shivered and faded away.

"That," he breathed, "was one of the local inhabitants, raising objections to our intrusion. Powerful objections!"

"IT WAS A MONSTER!" Lieutenant Evans babbled, clutching at him so that he had to thrust her off roughly. "We'll all be killed!"

"Hold on!" he snapped. "Get your feet on the bottom. It's not deep. You too, sir. It's shallow enough for wading. We're almost inshore."

"What was it?" She clutched at his arm.

"How should I know?"

"Get a grip on yourself, Christinel" her father yapped, getting his feet down solid and peering ahead. "This is no time to go to pieces. We're not dead yet. Come on!" He started wading. "Damn this light. Can't see more than a yard or two. Need landmarks of some kind, damnit. Better not get too far before daylight. Don't want to get lost. Can you see anything, Sergeant?"

We're back to that, are we? Query thought, and said, "No, not a thing, apart from some trees. I think they are trees, that is. That's no help. I haven't a clue where we are!"

"That's no way to look at it, man! Keep your chin up! Did a first class job back there. Saved our lives! First class. Resourcefull Can't give up now, damnit! We need you, your experience. You know the planet, the local conditions, stuff like that. All in this together now!"

They waded on in sweating silence and the mud grew deeper as the water shallowed, was no more than waist deep, and the dark columns of soaring trees came slowly closer in the gloom. Not quite gloom, Query thought. It was a strange light, with a curious luminosity of its own, and deceptive, so that sometimes one had the illusion of seeing a long way, and the next minute it was as if a blue green curtain hung there just beyond the nose. All at once Lieutenant Evans gave a weary wail.

"I'm tired! How much further?"

"Chin up, my dear. Keep on. Can't be much more of this. Soon's we're out and dry, get a little breather, take our bearings, you'll feel a lot better. Not long, now."

"But I can't see!" she complained drearily. "It's all dark!"

Query turned to peer at her in the gloom. The greenish glow made her skin show dead white and lost the black of her uniform altogether, so that she was just the face and bust of a woman seemingly floating in mid-air. He stooped to peer closer, and said, "You could try taking off your spectacles."

She raised her hand to grasp them, to lift them away, and the stem came off in her hand, the rest of it falling in pieces to splash into the dark water. "They're broken!" She held out the ear hook stem, and he took it from her, feeling the fragility of it even as his fingers touched it.

"Optical plastic," he murmured, "most probably vitreous carbon. And not broken, not as you mean it. Rotted. Eaten away." He held the stem to let Evans see, and rolled it in his fingers. The stuff crumbled and fell in damp flakes. "It's the effect of the atmosphere."

"Hah!" the old man barked. "I remember that. When we were putting the base down. Technical section tested it out. Biological activity. Only one thing proof against it. Special plastic. Right?"

"That's right, sir. Any time we have to go outside the Domes, and that's not often, we have to wear special protective suits made of that stuff. The Domes are made of it. Any time we have to make external ship repairs we mount a battery of ultraviolet floodlights. It's the only way. This stuff eats anything."

"Anything?"

"That's right, sir."

They slopped on in silence for a while, until they came at last to a huge blue black tree trunk that stood up out of the water and towered away up into the mist overhead. The water was only knee-deep now, and not water any longer but hot squishy mud. Query pressed his palm to the trunk as they went by. It had a rubbery feel; it was the very first time he had ever felt one with his bare hand. Their feet made glutinous sucking sounds as they plodded on.

"Sergeant Query?"

"Sir?"

"We're in a worse fix than I thought."

"Yes, sir."

"You say this atmosphere eats anything? Including us?"

"I suppose. As far as I know, nobody ever stayed out in it long enough to find out!"

"I suppose not. Hmml" Evans slurped on, scowling into the gloom. "But that can't be right, dammit! I feel fine! Wet and weary, yes. Stinking hot. Bruised. Smothered in this blasted mud. Getting a bit peckish, too. But fine, otherwise. Not sick!"

"No, sir. For what it's worth, I feel all right, too." Query took in a deep breath of the steamy, hot air, thick with unidentifiable smells, and said it again. "I feel all right!"

And then he froze into petrified stillness as that monstrous screech came again, only a lot closer now, and enormous, like a vast cavern of echoing noise, shaking the moist air with its fury. Lieutenant Evans hurled herself at him, clutching, frantically trying to burrow right into him, almost knocking him over. He put an arm around her, grasped his pole, and stared over her head, past the bole of a tree. From over there, a lot too close to be happy about it, came a sudden and growing barrage of wet, slapping, splash-plop impacts like huge boulders falling into the mud, but too regular to be anything like that. A galloping army?

"Good God, would you look at that!" Evans breathed, as the glowing miracle of the lanterns was repeated; a great wash of blue and green and scarlet lights spread out, like noise made visible. And there, at the heart and origin of the noise-color and making more, came a monstrous creature that sent his mind spinning for appropriate terms. At the front end was an enormous, slobbering wet, toothless gape of a mouth, and trailing it came a lumpy, round, wormlike body, spotted with peacock eyes all the way along its vast barrel girth. And under each "eye" stood a crooked leg with a flat and flipperlike foot on the end. The legs moved and slapped the mud like some set of crooked oars in a fiendish goblin galleon, slurping the gross body steadily along at a fair speed. Query could actually see the sluggish bow wave of mud being thrown up by its passage.

Accurate estimate was out of the question in the circumstances, but the blaze of witch fire made it possible for him to guess that the thing had to be at least ten feet

thick, or through, or high, and certainly something like seventy or eighty feet long. And if those spots along its flanks were eyes, then it couldn't see very well, only when it made a noise and so lit up the magic of the surrounding vegetation. And then only if it was something moving. And the lights! After that first petrifying moment, he felt only intense curiosity. Lights and noise interlinked, that was obvious. For now that the splattering barrage of sound was passing, going away as the monstrous creature headed for the water, the panoply of burning color was fading, dwindling away in the inrushing silence, closing in like the echoes of the uproar. Even this tree where they stood had taken on a faint red glow as if it had been infused with inner heat. His mind itched to follow up the speculation about ecological balance and survival factors. Noise and visibility. You could move silently and blind, or noisily and see—and be seen, too! Which was best, presumably, would depend on what you were, predator or prey. Then, as the last faint glows dwindled, he saw, or fancied he saw, furtive pale shapes standing well back in the painted undergrowth. They were gone like shadows before he could be sure.

Would they be more of those humanlike things, like that solitary one he had seen? He hoped, wildly, that it might be so. Blind conviction assured him they would be friendly, even helpful, if only they could be located and met. But while he was still building that fantastic hope in his mind, an idea came to him that lit a fire of urgency in him.

"Come on!" he muttered, levering the girl loose from her clutch, and nudging Evans out of his daze. "That thing must have gorged a hell of a track in the mud. A furrow. Better than sludging in this stuff. And all uphill, too! Come on!"

He ran forward in an awkward slurping scramble as fast as he could, with the girl frantic at his heels and Evans puffing and snorting after.

"What the hell . . . you reckon that was?" the old man panted. "Some kind . . . of lizard? Suppose . . . there's more?"

"Thing that size . . . we ought to be able to dodge it!"

Query reached an upflung ramp of stinking mud, hurled

himself at it and over and down the far side, slithering crazily into a trench that had a gravelly bottom. He scrambled up in time to see Lieutenant Evans come over the edge and skid down on her front, almost swimming, struggling madly; and then the old man, arms flailing and feet slipping out from under him. He waited only long enough to be sure they were unhurt then started up the ready-made track at a trot, turning his head to urge them on, "before it has time to flow back and swamp us. We may just get to somewhere high and half-dry. Come on!"

The mud walls were high on either side and already starting the slow slide back to fluid level, but the center of the track was reasonably clear. But not completely, as he found when he caught his foot in a half-buried root and went staggering to his knees. All this while he had carried the alloy tube, senselessly, with no clear purpose in mind except an instinctive need to clutch something. He got up and ran on, breathless and leg weary, sweating but unwilling to stop. And now, ahead, the pole was going to come in useful, possibly. He slowed to a cautious walk, then halted. Square in the base of the newly cut furrow lay something yellowish and jellylike, a roughly spherical blob about two feet deep.

It might be alive, he thought, edging close enough to prod it and be ready to duck back. It quivered. He prodded again, and it split and burst, releasing a flood of bright yellow ooze. The stench that came off it, hot and strong, made him heave instantly, and retch helplessly for a minute. As soon as he could straighten up and hold his breath, he scrambled queasily around and past it to stagger on.

"Sorry about that," he choked. "Won't do it again!"

His legs began to fail, to tremble with exhaustion, and his stomach was knotting itself into protests of its own. Sweat fairly spouted from him now as he shambled on. A part of his mind went away, cleared and looked down on his futile struggles with cold scorn.

You're doing it again! it said. Aren't you? Yielding to primitive instincts. Can't give up, can you? Lie down and die, you bloody fool! You know you're dead. Why keep on struggling?

But his body, his inheritance over untold millions of years of survival, kept right on driving, staggering, falling down and getting up again, going on with neither rhyme, reason nor sense. Until there was nothing left to get up with, and panic had nothing more to feed on. Until he fell to his knees and knew that he just could not get back up again. Breath burned in his throat as he labored for it. Reason came in and took charge. He fell flat on the damp, gravelly soil, rolled over and lay still, looking up into blue green glow-mist.

As his chest and lungs worked away by themselves, and his legs shivered in exhaustion, he realized, irrelevantly, that he could see more now and further. The dark blue boles on either side were indeed trees of some kind. At any rate they had extensions, and bits stuck on them, like branches and leaves. Would they light up, he wondered, if he could find the breath to shout loudly? And what about that light, anyway? Sunlight surely never got this far. Only this curious blue green glow, like being underwater. His memory grasped at that. It happened underwater, didn't it? Fish that spent all their lives away down deep in the ocean beds, in perpetual darkness, they had lights of their own. So why not here?

His breathing eased gradually, was almost comfortable, but now he was aware of hot wire cramps starting up in his stomach. Hunger? Or was it the first pangs of something worse? He sighed and levered himself up on his elbows, just in time to see Lieutenant Evans staggering into sight, reeling like a sleepwalker. Her dark brown hair hung in a stringy mass, matted with mud and sweat, against the stark pallor of her face. Her eyes were dark hollows of fatigue and fear. Her once sleek uniform was thick with the chocolate brown mud, burst-split at elbows and knees and gaping loosely in front, her straining breasts streaked and patched with the same stuff, a pathetic single strand of gold braid dangling from her waist. Her feet were a shapeless pair of blobs. She leaned into an invisible wind, caught her foot on his and fell, slowly and helplessly, so that he stretched to catch her and ease her down by his side. And now came the old man, really old now, tottering, caked in mud all over except his face, which was darkly

red with effort. He, too, fell and rolled over and lay still.

Query stared at them dully, his mind working as if full of the same mud. Why—the wonder came slowly—why hadn't the mud rolled back by now? He swiveled his tired eyes to look. It wasn't mud. The low wall on either side was a roughcast furrow of stony, gravelly earth, damp but firm enough to stand. Beyond those walls was a thickness of wild growth, bushes and shrubs and creepers and undergrowth. And the inscrutable, standing trees. No mud. They must be on some kind of high ground, he reasoned, shaking his head and having to use effort to stop it shaking. High ground. No point in running anymore. Safe here as anywhere else. He thought that over, then looked again at his companions. Die right here, why not?

The girl lay flat on her back, and his eye lingered on the upturned swell of her bosom, the rounded flesh seeming to symbolize to him all that was feminine and human and wasted. Beautiful girl destined to be some man's love, some child's mother . . . but now to die and rot here. That didn't seem right. Half-dreamily, he reached out a hand to brush away a flake of mud from her breast, and she stirred, rolled her head, caught his hand and held it fearfully tight to her flesh, her unspoken need burning in her eyes.

Then he felt movement on his other side, a grunt and wheeze, and Evans nudged him. "Just about got my breath back, Query. Not as young as I was. And this damned heat. Takes all the buck out of a man. Seem to be shut of the mud, though. What do we do now?"

"Why ask me? How would I know?"

"Damn it, you know the planet. Been here six months, haven't you?"

"Inside a bubble dome. In a protective suit. Nobody knows the planet!"

"Hah! Well! Got to do something, damn it! Can't just flop here, and wait for that blasted lizard thing to come back. Got to do something!"

"Such as what?" Query drew his hand away from its warm contact and sat up, but she sat up with him and caught his hand again, crowding close to him. He could feel her shivering. "Such as what?" he repeated.

"Got to get on, keep moving. Chin up. No defeatism here!"

"Look," Query was patient, "it's time you learned something. We're dead, all three of us. We were dead from the moment that drive blew. It is just taking us a while to find out, that's all. Dead. All bets are off!" She shivered again, drew his hand to her heaving breast and pressed it there, nuzzling her head against him helplessly. He felt her heart hammering.

"You're sick!" The old man's face came close, ruddy in anger, his blue eyes stern, the sweat running in rivulets among his wrinkles. "You're sick, Query! Don't know what you're saying. We are alive, and, by God, we are going to stay alive until we are rescued, got that?"

"Sure I'm sick." Query smiled at him in scorn. "So are you. So is she. Sick and dying. Pains in your guts, have you? Eh? And you?" He turned his head to look down at her and she stared up blankly.

"Don't leave me!" she whispered. "Don't leave me. I'm all right as long as you hold me tight. It doesn't hurt!"

He put his free arm around her and hugged her tight, turned back to Evans. "This air is full of life. I told you. Life, or death. It's the same thing, so far as we are concerned. Feel your uniform, Admiral. Feel the way it is rotting on you as you sit. Feel that titanium alloy tube there. Go on, feel it! And think of that in your lungs, in your mouth, in your stomach every time you swallow. Eating you away!"

"Sick!" Evans snorted. "Sick in the head, I mean. Queer. Always were, if you ask me. Where's your common sense, man! This air can't touch living tissue! Stands to reason, damnit! Look! Bushes, trees, plants and that damned lizard thing—all alive, aren't they? It doesn't eat them, does it? Does it?"

"They live here. They belong here. We are alien."

"The hell with that. We are alive, damnit! Sure we have pains, who wouldn't? But we are *alive*! And we are going to stay alive until they find us. Get that in your head, Sergeant! Hold on to it!"

"You're out of your mind!" Query had a sudden rush of rage, spurred by a twist of cramp in his belly. "Nobody

is coming for us. Why would they? Common sense, you say? Why the hell don't you use some?"

Evans edged back at this sudden fury. The girl moaned and clung, and Query was suddenly disgusted with her, too, shoved her away and stood to stare down at the pair of them. Evans backed, got to his knees and stood.

"That's not the way to talk to your superior officer, Sergeant!"

Query laughed at him openly and then down at her, on her knees, coming to grasp his legs and clutch in fear. "Superior? You two? Superior what? You don't have a pretty uniform anymore, either of you. You'd be dead two or three times over if it hadn't been for me. Not that it matters now, because you're dead anyway. But don't give me that superior bit, not now!"

VI

EVANS SEEMED TO WILT a little, and Query could feel sorry for him, could understand a little of his difficulty in facing something utterly new and outside his comprehension. And the girl, too. All her snotty efficiency, her pertness, her down-the-nose look had gone along with the uniform façade. She was groveling now, dragging at his legs, and it offended him.

"You're taking advantage, Query," the old man muttered. "We're in a bit of a mess right now. Dependent on each other. Got to pull together. And you're taking advantage. It will be remembered."

"You just can't shake it, can you? This conviction that you are somehow superior, qualified to give me orders, you can't shake it. Look, one more time. When that drive blew the ship went. So did we, so far as anybody knows or cares. So nobody is going to come and look for us, even if they had the equipment. Or the urge. Think about it, Admiral Evans. Not one man in Step Two will shed a tear nor heave a single sigh to know that you are dead. Get that? No rescue. There's just the three of us. As I said, all bets are off. We start even. If you *are* superior to me,

you'll have to show me. And be quick, we haven't a lot of time."

Evans turned away from him, made a pathetic attempt to square his shoulders and set his chin. Then he looked down at his daughter.

"Up on your feet, Christine. Come on, up! Pay attention now. We're going on and up, aiming for high ground. Better visibility. Come on!"

She started to scramble up, stood looking from one to the other, and Query smiled at her and waved ahead. "Go on, Christine," he said softly. "It will be all right. I'll be right behind you." For what good that does, he added, but inwardly. The old man set out, trudging doggedly, a pathetic figure, and she tramped wearily after him. Query shook his head at this latest manifestation of that wildly irrational creature called Man. Onward and upward to better things. The final confusion between symbol and reality. What a stupid way to die. But then, death makes everything alike, pointless and unimportant. And that was what these two couldn't grasp. That they were not important. He trudged after them, swinging the tube, feeling the grittiness of it in his grasp, wondering what his insides must be like. He ran his tongue over his teeth, and they felt normal. Perhaps the digestive juices were battling with the decay? Perhaps—wildly—the old man was right, and living tissue was somehow immune?

Even so . . . Query sniffed the riotous smells, felt the steady trickle of sweat down his face and chest, his back, his legs . . . even so, there was still starvation. Maybe his stomach cramps were nothing more than hunger, but even so—that was just as deadly. In all his solitary jaunts outside the Dome he had never once seen anything that looked even remotely edible. And starvation was an even slower and more painful way to die.

All at once he became aware that he was being watched. The spine-tickling sensation was unmistakable, as was the curious sense of people, curious . . . *they* were curious! And now that it had broken through to consciousness he realized the feeling had been with him for some time. He took a firmer grasp on the tube and flicked his gaze about, from side to side, ahead, over his shoulder, hoping to see something in the mysterious dark jungle. But nothing moved

that he could see. And no sound came. Yet the sense of presence was still there, quite positive. And not just one, but many. A host, all around, watching. And now there was subtle menace, a warning of impending danger, a threat. The tickle in his spine was almost tangible. He struggled with it, then suddenly whipped around to stare. And wheeled back just as frantically as Evans gave a great shout. Query ran, saw the girl break into a shambling run. The old man was nowhere to be seen. All at once Christine shrieked, flailed her arms wildly, and disappeared from view as if the ground had swallowed her.

Slowing through caution, Query ran on, and checked himself only just in time, to catch his breath and teeter on the lip of a huge, scooped out depression in the track. It was bowl shaped and steep sided, a hole all of forty feet across of compacted gravel and grit. And about nine feet down was the level of liquid mud that filled it, now bubbling and churning and giving off a fetid stench from the frantic struggles of father and daughter. Query swayed on the edge, staring. It looked to be about shoulder deep, so they wouldn't drown, at least, but how to reach down that nine feet to them? Then, as he fell to his knees and leaned over, trying to think of something to help, the far surface of the mud pool erupted, heaved up and splattered away from the big blunt snout and toothless gape of another many-legged thing. A lizard beast. Not as big as the other, possibly an infant, but terrifyingly huge in that confined pool.

Christine saw it, screamed with all her breath, and hurled herself around and at the gravel wall, scrabbling crazily at it, vainly seeking to climb out. Query shivered, leaned over and thrust the alloy pole at her. She snatched it, tried to climb crazily up it, jerking at his hold, and the edge crumbled and yielded under his knees so that he slid, lurched and went over and headfirst into the ooze. He landed on top of her, and she at once grabbed him, climbed up and over him in her mad urge to get out, shoving him deep under. Choking, spitting foul-tasting mud, he managed to get his feet on the bottom and his head out, to wipe away the slime, to see her go frantically for that wall again, shrieking, struggling uselessly to dig her nails into the hard gravel.

And the disturbed lizard thing bellowed, lifted its blunt head, and came slurping through the mud, following the noise. Up above and all around Query saw that strange flare-up of rainbow lanterns again, throwing a limelight glow, like muted floodlights in an arena. One crooked, flippered leg smashed him in the chest, kicked him aside as the creature wallowed on its way through the sludge, heading for its target. The huge, wet, toothless mouth gaped hungrily. Christine turned, saw it, shrieked again, and hammered at it with her fists, beating at the blind head. She might as well have punched at an elephant. The vast slobbering mouth snapped at her hand and caught her right arm up to the shoulder. She screeched again, battering away with her other fist. Query remembered the metal tube still in his grasp, whirled it, swung, and struck at the thing, at where he guessed its brain might be, if it had one. Mud squirted off. The impact was solid and gratifying. The creature didn't like it. It opened its enormous maw to bellow a deafening complaint and dropped the girl.

Query hit it again, savagely, hard on what should have been its snout. It bellowed again, right at him, blasting its stinking breath full in his face. He swung his feeble club again, and saw Evans, filthy and frantic, actually scrambling up on the thing, onto its lumpy back, to teeter there a moment and then leap crazily for the edge of the pool. The blunt, blind head was confused now, swinging uncertainly from side to side, washing the liquid ooze in great waves of stench. Query backed away, wallowing, hoping to get to one side and deliver a useful blow. Then he heard Evans shouting; "Over here! Come on! This way!"

There he was, on the edge, flat on his face and reaching down and out. Christine saw him, went splashing and wallowing frantically along the wall to reach him, to seize his hand and hang on, trying to get up. But the beast had another fix on the noise, slurped around, and started heading for it. She screamed as she saw it come, kicking out crazily, Evans hanging on like grim death, trying to hoist her out against the suck of the mud. Again that great wet maw opened and snapped hungrily, and caught her struggling feet. And fastened on them, sucking, holding on. Query smashed at it again, then grabbed, heaved himself

up on its back, stood, ran unsteadily, leaped and thumped down on the side, rolled over and clapped himself onto her free arm, alongside Evans.

The bankside had an edge just here, a small wall that came up against his chest and gave him support. Her agonized face was close, her eyes wide in terror.

"Hold on!" he grunted, as the blind beast swallowed more, gulping her legs down, the blubbery lips clamping on her thighs. The drag was frightful as the monstrous thing drew back, trying to pull her in and swallow its mouthful. *We can't possibly hold against that!* he thought, as the sinews in his arms creaked and ached and his chest felt as if it was caving in. *Something's got to give!* The strain was unbearable now. Then, all at once, the creature slipped back, and she shot forward over the edge, rolling all three of them over and over in a tangled heap. Query scrambled up and gave her a hand as Evans fought his way to his feet. They squandered just one backward glance to see the blind head lifted, and from that clamped mouth dangled a pathetic length of black stuff.

"Lucky!" Query gasped. "Your fancy uniform . . . came in useful . . . after all! Come on! Run! Before the damned thing comes out after us!" They ran, heavily and wetly, slurping mud, gasping, heedless of direction, crashing through the undergrowth, blundering around tree boles—with Christine pinkly and incongruously skin naked and clean from the waist down. They ran until they dropped at the foot of a massive tree.

"Safe enough . . . here . . . no tracks!" Query panted. "The thing . . . it doesn't . . . get this far!"

"Damned lucky . . . that time!" Evans choked. "That thing . . . no teeth! Lucky! Thought we were done for!"

"We're done!" Christine rolled over on her back, lay heaving for breath, staring up into the mist. "Done! Lucky that time! But . . . we can't go on . . . finished! What's the use?"

"Chin up!" Evans grunted, but all the heart was gone out of him.

"What's the point?" she gasped. "We're done! Lost! No food! Dark! Monsters all over the place! It's hopeless!" She struggled up on one arm and stared at Query. "You were right! We're all dead!"

"I'm afraid you're right," he muttered, dabbing at his leg and seeing the plastic of his uniform come away with the mud. "I did try to tell you. Might as well be civilized about it!"

"Not dead yet!" the old man mumbled stubbornly. Query ignored him, made the effort, got to his feet, leaned on the tree, and plucked at his rotting uniform, pulling it away in flaking patches. Symbolism again he thought. Naked I came into the world; naked I die! There was something satisfying about it, and he felt just that little bit cooler, easier, when he had brushed away the last shreds of civilization from his skin. A man ought to feel defenseless, like this, he thought, but I don't. I feel at home. He peered into the dark green mystery all around and smiled. I said I'd be back, didn't I? he thought. Well, here I am!

But there was no sense this time of unseen watchers. A little disappointed, he sat again, setting his back to the tree. And saw Christine's eyes on him. She had been watching him.

"I hope you don't mind." He sketched his nakedness with a gesture of indifference. "There didn't seem much point in trying to pretend anymore."

"That's right," she said quietly. "Pretending. That's all it was. Uniform and drill, cadet school and routine, gold braid and snappy salutes. Trying to be the boy he always wanted me to be." She glanced over there, and they both saw that exhaustion had taken natural toll on the old man; he was fast asleep. "It was all pretense. I've never really lived. Not like you. All my life, trying to be something else."

"Like me?" he frowned. "I haven't lived all that much."

"I know about you. I read you up, on the way here. Your files, and your civil record. Artist and designer. That's the kind of thing I would have liked. To deal with shape and beauty and color. Purpose. Create new ideas. You said civilized. That's civilized. That's what intelligence should do, make beauty. Create things. There's nothing beautiful or creative about the Service, about war and destruction."

"Depends on the point of view, I suppose," he said. "To the military mind I suppose there is beauty in a uniform,

in a drill, in slick efficiency, in everything working together."

"You must have hated it!"

"Right. But then, I'm not the military type. And it doesn't seem to matter a damn now either way, does it?"

"I hated it too, inside, where I could never get the chance to say it and mean it. I can say it now, to you. You understand." She plucked at the soiled shreds of the upper tunic of her uniform, pulled them away and crumbled the rotted stuff, threw it aside, brushing the last flakes from her skin with her fingers. "I wish I had done that years ago," she sighed. "So many things I wish, now that it is too late." She sat in silence awhile, staring in front of her, and he saw that she was trembling. Then she turned her head, her eyes wide on his. "You're not afraid to die, are you?"

He moved to sit close to her, to put his arm around her, and she put her face to his chest blindly. "I can't help you," he said, very softly. "Death has always been inevitable to me. And I've known about it longer than you. I knew we were dead when that drive blew. The rest was just a matter of waiting for it to happen."

"But you helped to rescue me. Several times. You hit me. You pulled me out of the wreck. You dragged me inshore. And . . . that monster thing . . . it had me . . . and you helped to save me!"

"Blind instinct, nothing more. That's built into us. It's very hard to fight."

She lifted her face suddenly, very close to his, her eyes huge and dark. "I don't know your name—yes, I do. Stephen. Stephen, I don't want to die. Isn't it instinctive to want to go on living?"

"To want to, certainly. I'd rather go on living, if I had the choice. But we don't have any choice, anymore, Christine. It's just a matter of waiting for it."

Her face came closer, and it seemed inevitable that their lips should meet and cling for a long while. She urged closer to him, hungrily, pulling him down to the damp soil, clinging to him. She moved her lips away from his just far enough to whisper, "We're still alive, Stephen, for a while yet. A little while only, and so much life to live . . .

all the things I've never done . . ." and she clung to him again, savagely, "... the primitive things!"

Query couldn't stop himself, even if he had wanted to. And he saw nothing but good in this, in making the happiest possible use of their last moments. It was a place and a time to be primitive.

Something of the strain, the shocks, the terrors of the recent past surged up out of both of them, lent fire to their embrace. And then, after the frenzied fire had burned low, she lay back in the crook of his arm and sighed and looked up at him contentedly.

"That was primitive," she breathed, "and good. Beautiful. It's all beautiful now. Even this place. Isn't it?"

"And you. You're very beautiful, Christine, now that you are being just you."

She smiled sleepily, found his hand and brought it to her breast and held it there, full and warm in his palm. "I'm glad," she said; and in another moment she was fast asleep. Query kept quite still, aware of the rise and fall of her bosom and the steady beat of her heart. He felt sad now, that this had to come to him so late, that he had to lose himself on this dark and primitive planet in order to find the simplicity of life lovingly offered to him. And he wondered about her, about the kind of life she must have led, armored in uniform and regulation, having to be cold and stern and stiff, when all the while there was the fire of life beating inside.

And his eyelids drooped too, and he rested his head on hers, and slept. His dream was a strange one peopled with things unseen but felt, that were positive and yet utterly strange. Eyes watched, eyes that he couldn't see. Minds touched his, wondered at him, ruffled through his thoughts like some casual stranger turning the pages of a book. Yet kindly. Curious. And he had the sense of someone wonderfully intelligent and wise who was intrigued at him as an adult might be at the momentary cleverness of a child. And he knew a longing, just as a child might, to know more. Tell me more!

He came awake suddenly and totally and kept quite still, absolutely certain that he was not alone. Heavy in the crook of his arm, Christine still slept, peaceful as a child. Query moved his head a fraction to stare aside and

he saw feet. Bare feet. Human feet, over there. Very slowly he eased free and raised his head more, came up to a sitting position and stared. And there was a man over there, ten feet away.

A man. No more than about five feet six and lean, sinewy, completely poised, his skin a pale tint against the dark blue green of the vegetation. Hair was a dark fuzz on his skull but nowhere else. Eyes were dark and intent, bright with intelligence. In his right hand, low down, he held the end of a rod—cane—something slim and dark, and his left hand, angled across his chest, held the upper end of it, bent it back under tension as if it was some kind of bow. A weapon at the ready. But a man, that was the main thing. A totally humanlike and adult man.

VII

QUERY GOT SLOWLY to his feet. In the face of that unmistakable weapon and the competent threat backing it, he had no desire to do anything fast or provocative. Now he had the awareness very strongly of many eyes watching him all around. This man wasn't alone. And yet there was no real threat now that he could feel it properly, more a sense of readiness. And also that curious feeling that he knew exactly what this man was thinking. That he was as good as saying, right now, *This is a weapon. One false move and you get it!*

He stooped slowly to nudge Christine awake, moved to stir the old man with his foot. "Don't do anything sudden," he cautioned, "but we have some company come to call."

And the strange man moved now, relaxing the tension in his weapon, dropping his left hand, letting the rod rest on his right shoulder. Evans snorted a time or two, rolled over and struggled to his feet.

"Eh? What? By God, who the hell's that?"

"Take it easy!" Query warned. "We're not in any trouble yet. Let's hope they're friendly." He tried to read the man's features, which were almost Oriental, but not quite. He felt sure this was no enemy, but that was just a feel-

ing without evidence. He heard Christine stir and move and get up—and gasp and cling to him anxiously.

“Who’s that?” she cried, and he touched her shoulder.

“Local inhabitants, obviously.”

“They’re cannibals!” she gasped. “They’ll eat us!”

“Where the hell did you get that idea from?” he snapped.

“For heaven’s sake, woman, use your head! Cannibals?”

“That’ll do!” Evans growled. “We’ll have none of that kind of talk, Query. Mind your manners!”

“And you, you stupid, fat, flabby, old fool!” Query rapped. “Will you never learn? These people are the local inhabitants. They are all around us. They have us helpless. If you have any brains left in that stupid skull of yours, you have to see that it’s up to us to be friendly. Rational. If you start throwing a panic or blustering from some mythical authority, we’ve had it!” He shook Christine free, stood her away. “Come on, now!” he said. “All that talk about the primitive. Well, here it is. Take a look at it!”

“Damned insubordination!” Evans roared. “You expect me to kowtow to a naked, bloody savage, man!” He lurched around to face the stranger, ready to stride toward him. “Here, you. Can you talk? Eh? What the . . . ?” His loud-voiced approach choked off as a snaking black thong flicked from one side and snapped around his ankle, sending him prone. In short order came three more: one for the other foot, one catching each wrist; the old man was helpless. Christine cried out and started to run to her father, and another snaking thong caught her ankle. Within seconds she was flat on her face and just as helpless as the old man. Query held still, turning only his head to follow back those black thongs.

There was a woman at the business end of each one. Native women, just like the man, about the same height and slim, but definitely and beautifully female. And competent, too, judging by the way they kept the tension on their lines. Whips, he concluded. Possibly some kind of creeper with a thickened handhold stem. And now there were men appearing out of the dark shadows, men just like the first one, each with a tube against his shoulder.

Query knew they were all looking at him, watching, waiting to see what he would do next. Edgy curiosity, that was all. No harm done. He felt no fear at all, just a sense

of shame at his stupid companions and bewilderment at what he ought to do next. And there was no time to wonder at the greatest wonder of all, that he was positive he knew what they were all thinking. He knew, for one thing, that the first man who had shown, and who still stood there waiting, was the head man. The man in charge. He looked at him again now, helplessly. *Give me a minute*, he thought, *to talk to them. Maybe I can get some sense into their heads!*

As if he had asked for it, all the ropelike lashes snaked away free, and Query had a fascinated moment watching the easy way in which each woman coiled her whip into a handful that dangled ready by her thigh. Then he went forward to where the old man was struggling to sit up.

"Listen," he said urgently, "and you, Christine. Shut up and listen, both of you. All this time you have been telling me what to do, shoving me around, telling me to get a grip on myself. Now it's my turn." As Evans started to roar he said again, savagely, "Shut up! These are people. They are as human as we are, by the look. They have been close by, watching us for a long time. Don't ask me how I know that, I do. They live here, and they look healthy enough. If we have any chance of surviving at all, we have it here by learning from them. Do you want to live or not?"

"A bunch of naked bloody savages . . . !"

"I'm naked. Look! And so is she. And your remaining rags are about to drop off any minute. So what's that got to do with anything? As for them being savages, take a good look. Do they look savage to you? See those whips? They could have cut you to ribbons with them, had they a mind to. And they have been watching us for some time, but they haven't done us any harm, yet. For God's sake forget that you are Admiral Evans—and you're Lieutenant Evans—that doesn't work here. We are the savages, the interlopers, and we are in trouble. We need help. And these people can help us, if we do it right. Do you want to eat? Do you want to live?"

"He's right, Father." Christine said, putting out her hand to the old man. "We need help. And I want to live, if possible."

"Siding with him?" Evans stared at her stupidly, and Query sighed.

"Work it out between you." He turned to look at the head man, to put his open palms wide apart in the obvious attitude of defenselessness. "I know my words won't mean a thing, friend, but they are all I have. We mean you no harm, no trouble. We need your help." The man was clean. Up close Query noticed that. Not a sign of mud on him, nor sweat either. And the hair on his head was bristle short and dark and matched the dark fuzz of eyebrows, but there wasn't a hair on him elsewhere. Then his eyes flickered and Query revolved swiftly. One of the women had come forward to face up to Christine, looking lean and small alongside her ample shape. Query felt the quick curiosity, saw the woman's hand go up and touch Christine's tangle of hair . . . and a handful of it came away in her exploring hand. She stared at it, tossed it away, and reeled back as Christine brought her palm around in a healthy swipe. The single palm slap switched the atmosphere to instant tension. Query caught his breath as the native woman steadied herself, put away her whip with a single flick of her hand, and came forward tigerishly to avenge the insult.

Then Query got a shock, as Christine stood back and fell into a pose that had science built into every line: one foot forward and knee bent, arms advanced and palms ready to chop. Oh well, he thought. This should be interesting. The native woman sprang, fingers clawed to grab, but ready arms batted hers aside, the heel of a firm palm jabbed under her chin, and she flew through the air to land in a heap. And bounced up readily in a way that made Query shake his head. Christine had the reach, the weight, maybe the skill too, but this woman was fit. And cautious now, coming forward, poking out an arm, and as Christine elbowed it aside those crooking fingers achieved a hold and clung, and the pair of them went down in a mad scramble of arms and legs. Evans roared and charged forward, and stopped with a jerk as a lash took him around the throat and yanked him off his feet, so that he fell back with a thud that knocked the wind out of him.

Query watched the scramble, saw that Christine was still holding her own, and his mind spun away to that hair. He touched his own, and it too was flaky, crumbling away, all except about an inch or so close to the scalp. He

scowled at it, sent his eyes back to the battle, but the idea took shape in his mind. Perhaps the old man was right. Perhaps living stuff *was* immune. That would make sense. Hair wasn't alive past the first inch or so. But now Christine was on her back, flat, with the native woman straddling her, choking her into hopeful submission. Until, desperately, she drew her legs up close to her chest and kicked, shooting her opponent away over her head. Christine scrambled up, heaving for breath but ready in that karate stance. The native woman came back, also blowing hard, ran full into a chopping left, a right, an elbow to the jaw, another chop, a savage kick to the groin that folded her up, right into a knee in the face; and she was out on her feet, staggering and falling back. Christine moved in for the kill . . . and a half a dozen snaking black lines hissed through the air to hold her.

Query flashed a look at the head man and knew instantly. He went forward, caught Christine by the arm as she struggled against the bonds.

"Hold it," he said. "That's good enough. You won, fair and square." He wrapped his arms about her firmly, felt the lashes slip away. "Keep still, honey. Hear me now. These people understand fighting. That part's all right. But they don't kill each other. Hear me?" She struggled against his arms, her face turned to his, her eyes wide, teeth bared in a snarl. "You won! It is all over! You don't have to kill her!"

Slowly the crazy fires died in her eyes and she softened, turned all the way to him and clung tight, panting, clutching him strongly. He stroked the short crispness that was all there was left of her hair and murmured, "You won't want a haircut for sure, so long as you stay here. Come on now, no need to take on. That was a good fight. You've had lessons!"

"Oh Stephen! I *was* going to kill her. I *was*! And Father called *them* savages! Forgive me?"

"That's not for me. What about the lady you just flattened? Let's take a look at her, shall we?"

But there was no need. The woman was getting up, painfully and with much flexing of her arms and neck, but without any resentment that he could feel, just uncertainty and curiosity. "What shall I do?" Christine asked.

"Give her a smile. It can't hurt. Feel friendly to her."

The response was instant and dramatic. The native woman beamed and came forward, obviously taking the smile as an invitation. She put out her hand again, and this time Christine held still, permitting herself to be touched and felt. It was so obviously admiration, curiosity and friendliness that Christine laughed as the delicate hands explored her curves.

"Oh, Stephen. I think she likes me. And I think she's cute, too. They're all nice people. So neat. They make me feel big and clumsy!"

"Hardly that." Query denied, as the old man was released from restraint and came plunging forward to halt and stare around at the silent ring of faces that surrounded him.

"Not a stitch among 'em!" he growled, and Query thought he knew why that was so persistently offensive to the old man.

"Right!" he said. "That's the only kind of uniform that's worth anything, when you get down to it. Nothing stuck on. No braid, buttons, stripes or stars to label you. Just your own self, for what you are."

"By God, you really hate the Service, don't you?"

"And you love it. Without it you're nothing, just a flat, flabby and futile old man. Can't you feel what these people are thinking about you?"

"Feel what they are thinking?"

"You mean to tell me you can't?" Query was astonished. He looked to Christine, met the same incomprehension there. It was just as hard for him to believe them. To him the wash of mental comment and emotion was as real and effective as anything he could see. Right now it was a wordless debate on what to do next, resolving itself into a simple choice. Leave them here? Take them with us? Query eyed his companions urgently.

"No time to explain," he said, "even if I could. And I doubt it very much. Answer me just one thing, are you as hungry as I am?" The pain in his belly was acute now. Their faces were enough to tell him. He turned to stare at the head man, trying to get him to feel that ache. And something happened. The sense of the whole group changed. The head man made a gesture, spoke a single noise, turned

to point and set off with the whole crowd in silent unison after him.

"That's us," Query said. "Let's go."

"Where to?" Evans demanded suspiciously.

"All right, stop here then. Suit yourself!" Query told him crisply then started off in pursuit. In a moment he heard the other two come tramping after. Noisily. Not like the pale natives, who seemed to glide like shadows through the gloomy undergrowth. But they lived here, of course. And who would have believed that humanlike people could ever have evolved in a jungle world like this, in the perpetual half-dark of living mist? And that reminded him of the pangs in his belly, that were paradoxically not so hard to bear now that they were constant. From there his thoughts circled back again to death. Was it so certain, now? These people lived. It was at least a straw to clutch at. But then he realized the group had stopped, were all still. He stopped, too, caught at his companions as they blundered up.

"Hold it. We've stopped for something, I don't know what."

Evans was too blown to offer comment, but Christine came close, to hold his hand and ask, "Can you really tell what they are thinking?"

"Not thinking. I know what they are feeling. Emotional reactions. Quiet. They're after food of some kind."

The pale figures were spread out now in a circle. One of the women moved close in to the bole of a mighty tree, lifting her chin to stare up. Then she raised her palms and smacked them together with a crack like a pistol shot, just once. As if she had turned a switch, the massive bole in front of her glowed into colored fire, a rich ruby red that swept up and up, until the whole immense tree shone like a living gem, the scarlet flood spreading out along the branches and fanlike leaves, away up there into the mist. It was so glorious that Query wanted to shout aloud, "Do it again!"

But it was not to be. He felt the quick negation of failure, and the ruby red glow dwindled and died away. Over by another tree, another woman stepped close, peered up, struck her palms together . . . and the lovely miracle was repeated, only this one was more a glowing orange,

like a flame that leaped up, suffusing branches and leaves and round ball-pendant things that hung there in profusion. Golden lanterns! He felt now the quick pleasure of success. The woman said "Hah!" sharply, and again, "Hah!" and the group gathered around. The men started a rhythmic clapping that kept the tree in a constant ripple of golden fire, standing in close to the bole, while the women moved out a little and uncoiled their whips, each seeking a clear spot.

Now Query saw what those whips could do. The woman nearest him set her feet firmly, shook out the long black thong, stared up, and swung her arm over and up, the slim lash curling and lashing out high up there, plucking one of those glow gold balls and bringing it thumping down into the bushes. Other lashes hissed and flew and cracked and plucked, and the fruit came down like heavy hail, thumping and bouncing. Query noticed, too, that the nearby bushes were splashed with faint light, so that they looked like creations in luminous glass.

"Fantastic!" old Evans muttered. "Never seen anything like that before. Looks like the whole damned tree is alight. What d'you make of it?"

"At a guess, it's some kind of fluorescence. Chemical reaction to sound waves. See, the nearby bushes are all glowing, too. Wonderful!"

"It's so beautiful!" Christine breathed. "Living color in a dark world. So lovely! Oh . . . they've stopped!"

The glorious orange fire faded slowly away as the clapping ceased. Out of the gloom came the head man, holding a fruit-body in his hand to offer to Christine. The woman she had fought came up with one for Query, and another woman, smiling, with one for Evans.

"Are we just supposed to eat it?" the old man muttered, and Query wondered, trying to get the message.

"I think I know," he said, smiling at the woman in front of him and hefting the fruit. It was as big as a watermelon and as heavy but with a rubbery feel about it. "Watch me." He smiled again, handed it back to her and waited. She smiled in return, tucked the thing under her arm like a football, and tore at the rind where the stem had been until she had cleared enough room to extract what looked like a marble embedded in jelly. She put it in her mouth

and gave the body of the fruit back to him. Then she smiled and went away, obviously satisfied.

"Polite little ritual," Query chuckled, sampling one of the marblelike objects. It was chewy and fibrous, something like a nut, and the jelly was as sweet as honey without being sticky. In a moment they were all munching eagerly. The first swallow made Query's stomach growl but the pain got no worse, which was something to be glad of. "That noise-color is really something, though, isn't it?" he demanded. "Life has its compensations."

Christine nodded, cleared her mouth to sigh, "It was marvelous. Like living fire. Did you notice that the bushes were all sorts of different colors, where the tree was all one? Do you suppose anything would light up if I shouted?"

"I don't see why not," he said. "It's all noise."

She moved away excitedly, picked out a tree, stood close to it, and put her head back. "Hah!" she shouted, and smacked her hands together. And the miracle worked for her as before. Lambent lime green light sprang up in the mighty bole and spread swiftly upward, and then out along interlacing branches and leaves. And then she screamed, and Query stood for a moment in chill horror, as down the mighty trunk scuttled a swarm of many-legged things like giant spiders, bulbous yellow bodies as big as his palm all spotted with scarlet eye patches, being rustled along on finger thick legs. She screamed again with all the power of her lungs, and the tree shone brighter as if to mock her.

VIII

QUERY SHOOK HIMSELF free of his stunned horror and started to run to her. By his ear he heard a sibilant "wheep!" of sound and the leading leggy horror stopped still, squirted yellow ichor, and there was a black spike there that pinned it struggling to the bole. Another "wheep!" and another spider thing stopped short and wriggled on the spike that impaled it. And now a virtual hail as the men moved in and the women clapped in ruthless rhythm. Christine seemed paralyzed, staring upward. Query reached her,

took her arm, and then he saw what she was looking at, and his knees shook, his stomach curdling into an icy lump. High up there, about thirty feet up, in the crotch of the first branch, squatted an enormous shuddering mass of bright scarlet with black markings, and even as he gazed at it in fear it moved and writhed and spread out a snaking mass of long ropy tentacles, two of them twisting and slithering rapidly down the glowing tree trunk.

He shook her arm, his mouth suddenly dry, and she screamed again but stood there unable to move. He shook her roughly, turned her around, grabbed her arm and started to run. She stumbled and came a little way, then fetched up short with a jerk and a frantic screech. He wheeled round and saw that one of the snaking, ropy tentacles had caught her by the foot. He grabbed her tight and threw his weight backward, slipping his arms under her armpits and hauling madly. The snakelike thing curled and held on. She screamed again, kicked frenziedly and became suspended, a human link in a macabre tug-of-war, wrenching and kicking as the tentacle clung, worming its way around and up her leg, more and more.

Evans came roaring up and past, and flung himself up at the straining tentacle, missed, and fell back . . . and the second one, looping, caught him by an arm and started hauling him in and up. Query dug in his heels, braced himself, leaning back and hauling with every ounce of strength he could get, as that death grip hauled back and up, taking Christine's leg high in the air, dragging him along no matter how he strained. The looping tip was circling her thigh now, and she flung herself crazily to and fro, her free leg flailing.

Then there came a crack like a rifle shot, and another, and another. Then the women were there, arms swinging and the black thong-whips whistling with murderous effect. As each cracking lash bit into the ropy arms there was a spout of scarlet and ragged chunks of flesh leaped away. The cut limb thrashed savagely, dragging Christine and Query back and forth like toys on the end of a thread. But the whistling lashes were ruthless, hacking and slashing, tearing the tentacle to pieces with each slash. All at once that powerful limb fell limp and dead, and Query

staggered back, with Christine plunging heavily on top of him to cling and shudder and moan in helpless terror.

"All right!" he panted, hugging her, trying to soothe her. "It's all right! It's gone!"

"My leg!" she mumbled, struggling in his arms. "My leg!"

"It's all right." He held her tight and stared down along her body, and the dead end of the horror was still there, still gripping her leg, even in death. "Hold still!" He eased out of her frantic clutch and got hold of the repulsive thing, struggling to unwind it, to rip it free and throw it away. Around her leg there was a sullen weal that would be a bad bruise later on, but there didn't seem to be any other damage. He felt, delicately, and looked up at her, meeting her staring brown eyes.

"Nothing broken, Christine. You're all right."

She seemed stunned. He went to her head, helped her to sit up, and sat by her to watch the carnage that was still going on. It was horrible, and yet, in a strange way, with a beauty all its own, beauty in the pitiless and precise way these people worked together. Three of the women strove in concert, lashing away at the ropy tentacle that still held Evans by his arm. The bite of their lashes spattered him with the red fluid, hacked away gory chunks of living tissue, until that tentacle, too, snapped and fell limp, depositing Evans in a heap on the ground.

But other women were working their way in by slow steps, arms swinging in powerful rhythm. It was like a macabre dance. Query watched the shoulders swing, their firm breasts lifting and tensing as they threw weight behind each lash, cutting away, higher and higher, literally butchering the repulsive thing up there by inches. And the men were busy, too. They were something to see. Apparently the bottom, or handgrip of the slim tube they carried, was also a store for the slim, six-inch spikes. Darts fell into the left hand, which moved instantly to the tube tip to drop them in and grasp and strain the tube into a quivering arc; and then flick—faster than the eye could follow—and "pluck" as they struck home in that shuddering, octopuslike body up there.

The spider things had all been taken care of. They were pinned all the way around the massive trunk, and even as he watched, Query saw one man put his tube neatly

under his arm and move in, clapping into the rhythm for a moment, then seizing and tugging at the spike, freeing it and the spider body in the one motion, moving on to another, tossing the many-legged bodies clear, stuffing the spikes into his weapon butt. This done, the man moved back out and clear, keeping the clapping going while another man moved in and collected spikes. And Query realized of course these people could work together. If he could share something of their common feeling, then it was obvious that they all shared with each other a common awareness. No need for words of command or drilling. They knew what to do and what everyone else was doing. The ultimate in teamwork.

Christine shivered, and he put his arm about her. "All right now," he said, feeling the inadequacy of the words and wishing he could touch her mind the way he could reach and touch these "savages." The play was almost over, the long whips hissing and slashing close to that obscene body up in the tree. One of the women drew back, coiled her whip, and stooped to give old Evans a strong arm, helping him up and assisting him away. And only just in time. Down came the bloated thing, a bladder of scarlet and black, to hit the ground soggly and quiver. And the murderous lashes flicked and tore at it until there was positively no life left.

Query sensed jubilation, almost exultation, and not just the victory over a threat. It was more than that. Rejoicing? He stared at the way the women gathered up the cutoff chunks of tentacles, and at the men who collected the spider bodies as if they were precious. And when the warm saliva flooded his mouth he knew—revolted and unbelieving—but he knew. The head man came across to where he sat hugging Christine. He carried a dripping chunk of tentacle as thick as an arm and almost a foot long. He offered it, and Christine took a good look and moaned, turning her head away. Query had difficulty mastering his stomach as he stretched out his hand and touched the delicacy to acknowledge it. Then he pushed it away and shook his head, hoping to be understood. *It may be a tasty morsel to you, my friend, but we don't fancy it. You have it!* The head man's expression showed puzzlement, and then a shrug and finally a big grin. He went away quickly, to

come back with the original fruit-body Query had put aside when Christine tried her experiment. *You're smart* Query thought, *that's much more our speed!* and he accepted the fruit gratefully. But there was more in the mental crosscurrent than that.

"Better eat something, Christine, you need the strength. We're going to move, soon, and you have to come along now. You're something of a heroine, far as I can gather."

"A heroine?" She opened her mouth to ask it, and he plugged it with a nut and chuckled. The sense of it was quite clear in his mind.

"Right. You knew where the good food was; you went right to it and called it out. And you didn't even have a whip!"

"Food? They are actually eating . . . those things?"

"Right again. Just some, though. The rest they are going to carry back to the . . . village, I guess it must be. Home, anyway. And you're the guest of honor. We all are. They've never seen anything like us before, but we have proved ourselves, it seems. Look, your father has made a hit, too. See?" Query aimed his arm to where Evans sat nearby being fed and obviously admired by two women. "This place has its attractions as well as its dangers. I doubt if it would ever get boring . . ."

"I've been thinking about that," she said, in a curious, little girl voice, "and I remember something from biology class—it seems a lifetime ago—something about intestinal bacteria. We all have them, of course, and without them we would starve, because they work to produce all the enzyme breakdowns we need. That's why one has to be careful not to take too much of an antibiotic dose when sick. Because that destroys the digestive bacteria, too. And that's what this air must be doing to us."

"That sounds logical," he admitted, "but maybe we are replacing our kind with the local variety while we eat?"

"I doubt if it's that simple. Stephen . . . I think we are going to die, after all. It's ironic, isn't it? To find this, and each other . . . too late!"

He had nothing to say to that, nothing that would help. In a while the natives made obvious preparations to be on their way again. Query helped Christine up, lending an arm to ease some of the weight on her bruised leg. He

saw that Evans was still being taken care of. Those women had probably never seen a fat man with white hair. It was natural for them to be fascinated. And it was, he supposed, equally natural for Christine to cling to him and to heed him as a man in a moment of stress like this. The group moved easily now, in less of a hurry, and it was no strain to keep up. It gave Query time to think. The imminence of death had to be considered in a new light now. It was nothing to him. He had become resigned to it long ago. But she was now beginning to accept it, what with the shocks and stresses of this weird place and the obvious fact that they were not going to be rescued.

And, as he himself had said, when you're going to die, all bets are off. It was natural then, that she should cling to him, want him, see their relationship as something more than just the throw of fate. But it wasn't like that for him. She was a beautiful girl, true, and under that civilized exterior so recently peeled away she had qualities he liked. But it was no more than that; no more than affection and sympathy. Person to person, she was more alien to him than these silent natives gliding through the dark jungle all around him. He couldn't sense her feelings, her emotions, the way he could touch these others. And that was something to marvel at as they trudged along, finding some obscure way in and out through the standing trees, gradually but steadily making their way uphill.

He had never thought of himself as psychic in any sense. Quite the reverse. Always he had known extreme difficulty in understanding other people's motives and values. He could understand words and observe actions, but when it came to knowing why people did what they did he had always been stuck with the sense of being alien. Different wavelength, he had called it. Only that was an explanation that didn't explain anything at all. She, Christine, had said it was ironic. How little she knew how truly ironic it was. After a whole lifetime of being odd man out, he now felt at home and akin to an alien race of jungle savages, who had no right to exist at all according to all the best authorities. Yet he couldn't blame her for wanting the nearness of his presence and the comfort of his maleness. And it would have been unnecessarily cruel to remind her that in any other setting she wouldn't have had a second thought

for him nor he for her. In the face of death, he mused, nothing seems to be very important anymore.

And now the way really was uphill, a steep climb between the looming walls of a gorge. Christine began to sway and lean on him heavily. He understood her fatigue. His own legs were beginning to fail, and his stomach had been gnawing at him for some time. But he had one advantage denied her and he shared it now.

"Not much further, Christine," he muttered, holding her up. "We're almost home. Not much more to go."

And it was true. Within minutes the narrow zigzag path opened out onto a flat area, and there came a slow, scented breeze that was warm but wonderfully refreshing. Ahead of them a pool shimmered in the rock, fed by a slim waterfall beyond, a silver ribbon of water that tumbled down the steep side of a cliff pocked with caves and graced with bushes and creepers. And people came running, old men and women, youths, toddlers, all in a mental deluge of warm reunion, rejoicing and eager anticipation of a feast. And this was home, in a sense Query had never known. He was swamped in it, excited and shaken by the instant acceptance, the friendliness, the complex crosscurrents of chatter and gossip, the frankness of the comments on these strangers, these weird ones . . . but all in friendship.

"That water looks inviting." Christine mumbled. "Oh, to be clean and cool again! Help me, Stephen." She had no need to urge him. The returning hunters had laid down their burdens and were trotting toward it. He saw old Evans being half carried along. He hugged Christine and they ran together and waded in; it was wonderful to feel it washing away the aches, the grime and sweat. Warm, it was, but clean and stimulating. Query felt his spirits rise, most of his strength coming back, as he wallowed and went under and luxuriated in it. Beside him, Christine ducked under and came up to blow and laugh and shake the water from her face.

"I needed that!" she sighed. "It's wonderful to be clean again. I suppose it wouldn't do to drink it?"

"Not here. Over there, by the fall. Come on." He took her hand and they waded across, shoulder deep, to where the silver rope of water plunged from the rock into the

pool. He stood under it, let it fall on his face and into his mouth, and drank as if his insides were sponge. Then she shoved him aside and did the same; and he had time to look at her and marvel. The short hair clung boyishly to her skull, but there was nothing boyish about the rest of her as she stood up out of the water and reveled in the splashing flow. She had a glow, a sheen on her skin. She was really beautiful, lovely and desirable—purely primitive, he thought—and she shook her head, and laughed, and met his eye before he could shield his thoughts . . . and the rosy color came instantly to flood her cheeks. In that instant she knew what he was thinking, and there was another marvel for him to puzzle over as they joined hands and made their way out and onto the mossy bankside. Purely primitive. Body to body, instinct to instinct . . . and who was he to say there could be anything more than that?

As if to rebuke him, his stomach knotted into a sudden savage twist of pain, so that he bent over and clutched his belly. In a moment she was down with him, her face white and strained, holding herself.

"The water!" she groaned through clenched teeth. "We shouldn't have . . . oh God . . . it's burning me!"

"Caught all ways," he muttered. "Starve, die of thirst . . . or be eaten alive from the inside. Nothing we can do. Just bear it!"

Just when it seemed he had to scream, the spasm passed, leaving him limp and shaken. She was rocking to and fro, hugging her knees and groaning, shaking her head. Then, all at once, she fell back, straightened out and arched herself up and away from the moss in a straining wrench, groaned and then slumped flat, panting heavily. "Oh, Stephen!" she moaned. "I can't stand anymore of that. It was hellish!"

"I know. I wish there was something . . ." he looked about desperately, wondering if his mental need would strike any chord now. Would these people understand sickness? Would they be able to help? Something was happening. They were all starting to gather in a rough semi-circle around the cave wall, and he got a blurred impression of some kind of ceremony. Then a native woman came up to him, holding in each hand a gourd-shaped something.

He knew it was something to drink, well meant, helpful. He took one, and the other . . . and the woman smiled and went away. It *was* a gourd, and full. What's to lose? he argued, and lifted it, tilted it, let the stuff touch his lips. It seemed to evaporate inside his mouth, straight into the soft tissues, spreading a glow and a tingle . . . and a blessed relief.

"Here!" he handed her the other one. "It may be just local brew, or anesthetic—or plain poison, but it certainly feels good inside."

He took another sip and the warm goodness spread further, soothed his aches. He watched her come down from a second and third sip and a swallow, saw the color come back to her cheeks and a glow in her eyes.

"Powerful stuff," she murmured, looking at the gourd with respect. "We'll probably get high on this!"

"We have a choice?" he demanded, and she shook her head and tilted the gourd again. He copied her, and came down feeling light-headed and good.

"Better than gut-rot, anytime. If this is the way to die, I'll take it." He laughed at her as if he had said something witty, and she laughed in turn, scrambling around to sit by him, to put her arm around him and hug him close. All around them the natives were settling by pairs, completing the semicircle, facing the cave wall as if about to watch a performance of some kind. "Curtain up!" he said, fondling her. "Last act!"

And then the clapping started, perfectly in rhythm, to a steady beat, and the lights came on, spreading swiftly up the wall, up the steep slope, rippling and glowing with quiet fire in every imaginable hue and shade of color, a vast living rainbow. Query held his breath. He felt Christine stir and sigh, looked aside to see the colored radiance painting her face and throat and breasts. She turned to him in ecstasy.

"Isn't it wonderful? Heavenly beautiful. Oh, Stephen! To live here, with beauty like this just for the asking! Such radiance! What lucky people they are to have all this!" She turned back to it, glorying in the display, dazzled by it. The clapping was augmented now by a wordless chant that stirred fresh combinations in the orchestral color. She gasped as if overcome by her feelings. "It's too much!"

Too much loveliness!" He glanced away from her delight to look at the couples around him and saw that they were finding joy in each other, those who weren't clapping. She saw, too, and turned back to him with wordless invitation in her eyes, her lips offered, her arms enfolding him, drawing him down and down.

IX

THE WORDLESS CHANTING, the thudding primitive beat, the incredible loveliness of that living color display, and the potency of the brew all conspired together to lift them into an urgent ecstasy, that soared and soared, again and again, until they were both utterly exhausted, completely drowned and drained of all tension, only half-conscious, floating in a mist of soft weariness. The chant-and-clap drummed on, washing over them, and the glorious rainbow hillside shone down . . . until, all at once, he was aware of something new, something different, something cool, clear, electric, that needled through the warm complacency which drugged him. He sat up, peering stupidly, wondering—and the clap-beat surged up, grew fast and furious—and he felt a swelling tension that was almost painful.

And there, right in the focus of the circle, grew a shimmer of white: a transparent ovoid that hovered and shone. The native chant became words, rolling in echoes against the cliffside.

"Hel-seeeee! Hel-seeeee!"

Query stared, felt his back hair lift, as the shimmer slowly grew more solid, more substantial, took on a shape. He had that strange sense of soft, feather fingers touching his mind, groping among his thoughts. The shape was clear now, distinct. A human shape. A woman, tall and imperious but all pearly glow, like some Greek statue carved in radiance. The chant swelled louder, more impassioned:

"Hel-seeeeeee! Hel-seeeeeee!"

He shared something of the overwhelming awe. A supernatural person . . . a goddess! He wanted to shout and

feel afraid along with the rest, but that tickle in his mind, light as gossamer, stopped him. Held him. All at once the uncanny visitor raised her arms, spread them wide. The chanting and clapping stopped as if cut off by a switch. There was absolute silence, a hush that echoed. Then she lowered one arm, pointed the other, and Query heard her quite positively in his head.

"You! Come! Come to me! Come!"

There was never even a question of refusal. He struggled up at once, helpless as a puppet on a string, swaying unsteadily, distantly aware that he was drunk, but imbued with only one thought. He started shambling forward, weaving in and out among the breathless natives. The hillside had faded into gloom against which the goddesslike woman stood out in a white glow like a human candle flame. He stumbled on, having trouble focusing his eyes and more trouble believing what he saw. She was tall, almost as tall as he was. And slim yet not frail. Fully a woman. Yet white like pearl, even to the clustering curls of her hair. Only her eyes had color, were glow gold flames that drew him on and on, controlling him with power that had nothing of hurt in it, nothing angry, just power. Until he stood, swaying, within touching distance of her, mouth stupidly agape. There came a monologue inside his head, in a cold, clear precise *voice*.

Not one of us. And yet . . . and yet . . . what are you? Why are your thoughts so confused?

"I'm drunk!" he confessed muzzily. "Drunk on the local brew. Strong stuff. And sick, too!" She understood something of it, he knew.

You are in pain? Distress of some kind?

There was just the ghost of an expression on her face to go with the words in his head. Smooth. Alabaster . . . that was the word he had been looking for. Beauty incarnate . . . or delirium? And in that moment all the warm comfort of the drink ran out of him, all the anesthetic, the false glow . . . and he folded and fell, knotted breathless by the hot wire agonies in his belly, straining to curl in on himself, to breathe, to bear the screaming pain of it. For one hideous breath . . . and then the cold, imperious authority of her struck through the cloud of agony, pushed the pains away—not right away, but just there, just out of

reach, so that he held quite still not daring to move, feeling the sudden sweat breaking out all over his body. And then her voice again.

Be still. There is no pain now.

He held it for another breath, and she was right. He let go, fell flat, rolled over on his back and lay there looking up at her, as drained as if he had been passed through a wringer. She inclined her head to look down at him curiously. It was a living force, that curiosity. Then she spoke again.

You will come with me. I wish to know more about you!

Then came the crowning insanity of all, as she stooped, crouched, took his hand firmly, with a real, flesh-and-blood hand of her own, and straightened up. He lifted, up and away from the damp moss, as if filled with air or something lighter. Up like a bird, but a bird that could fly with neither wings nor effort, not stirring a breath of air in passing. Up, so that he could stare down and see the silent natives, the hillside, the shimmering pool, all dwindling fast away down there, then lost in the mist. Alone in trackless mist with only the white goddess-woman and her curiously impersonal stare, her unbelievable perfection of shape and form.

I'm dead! he thought. This is it, the final delirium. Snatched up to Heaven by an angel. That native brew must be really powerful stuff!

But it was rationalization, and he didn't believe it. He believed what he was seeing, no matter how incredible it was. And he knew, somehow, that she was not aware of these thoughts of his. He knew that it was more effort for her to speak into his mind than to fly away with him like this. He knew many things, as if he stood near a vast storehouse of wisdom and some of it was leaking off at him. There was no sense of motion in him, only in the mist that whirled past. Then there were patches of dark, a vast concourse of mighty treetops, a forest; they stooped down into it like an eagle pair, swooping through the leaves and branches to home in on one tree out of all the rest, like birds to a nest.

As gently as though on tiptoe, he stood on a broad branch. He walked with her hand in his, her shoulder to his, along the branch and right into the heart of the tree.

And there were bright colors here. Tiny starlights on the walls, hanging lanterns that shone but looked like bell-flowers. And a softness that was firm for him to sit on. And then lie back on, and stretch out. And her glow gold eyes coming closer, holding his, drowning him in their inscrutable depths.

The rest was dream upon dream, some gloriously good, others terrifyingly black and bad, and yet others that bewildered him completely. None were clear as to detail but more as if he had to hurry through them, to skim and digest and catalogue the contents. It was more like thumbing through an unending series of lesson books and instructions, learning, struggling to learn, and all the while conscious of his laggard ability, the relentless drive to do better.

The bad ones were horrible, all about himself and everything that was wrong with him, full of aches and pains and twisted spots, things he would rather not have touched; yet he had no choice but to struggle and fight his way through. There were a lot of those.

The good ones were about him, too, but not himself alone. Always there was someone else close, someone warm and wonderful, holding him safe, cradling, comforting and caressing him, exciting him, inspiring him with leaping strength and power and exultation, making him happy, whole and well. Those ones were a kind of delight, a sort of reward for doing well.

But the others, the problem ones, were baffling. Fingers in his mind picking and turning over the pages of his life, sorting them into words and questions and ideas and more questions, until he felt all jumbled and scattered and argued over. All fragments. All dreams. Nothing in any detail that he could cling to. Wild bits of imagination. And the strong conviction of passing time, a long time. A lifetime, in a way.

Query became slowly aware that he was awake. That he was flat on his back and comfortable, with his eyes shut . . . but awake. Not dreaming. In that moment all the million scattered fragments of all those dreams rose like a swirl of invisible dust and blew away. He opened his eyes and saw a blue bell-like flower shining down on him with its own cool light. It stood out from the pale yellow wall,

as if it was growing there on a slim stem, and hung down shining on him.

"I think you are well now, Stephen Query." The voice was slightly hesitant over the shapes of the words but clear and confident otherwise. A quiet voice, yet it seemed to sing. Over to his left. He rolled his head to look. She was seated there, across the room from him, about eight feet away and quite at ease. Seated in a curious bowl-shaped seat that seemed to be part of the yellow wall and made of the same stuff. Feet planted firmly apart, hands on her knees, back against the support, her face calm, only those gold eyes with any hint of life. She might have been a statue in pale pearl, as before, but now there was no visible radiance from her. Above her head another bell-shaped flower, growing from the wall, shed its light down over her head and shoulders.

He moved, sat up, swung his legs over the side of the thing he lay on and put them down on the floor. It struck warm and somehow fibrous, like a smooth carpet against his bare feet. A quick glance showed him that he was naked. So was she, and it seemed unthinkable otherwise. He looked at her again, curiously, really looking this time, aware that he was not giving any offense. Her face told him nothing, yet he knew she was patiently waiting for him to adjust. A perfect face, finely chiseled, a study in mild curiosity. Ageless, unlined, smooth. Her skin, all of her, was white as milk, and yet with the glow and sheen of abundant health, needing no color at all to enhance it.

She sat quite still, as if there was all the time in the world for him to stare, her slow gentle breath lifting her breasts, that might have been arrogant, overabundant, even coarse, on another woman but were all part of her flawless shape, her completely. There was just the suspicion of a blush of pink at her nipples and lips, and her fingernails. And not a hair on her body apart from the clustered white curls on her head. And he knew she was by far the most beautiful, most wonderful, most alien creature he had ever seen. And he was afraid. He looked into her eyes.

"They called you Helsee," he said, remembering. "You're some kind of supernatural being. An angel, or a goddess . . . aren't you?"

"No." She seemed to take his words just as they came

and think them over carefully. "The jungle people use that sound to mean my people, we who live in the trees. To them, I suppose we are . . ." she hesitated, selecting her words, ". . . a kind of supernatural thing. Superhuman. I found that concept in your mind. But I am not that as you mean it. The jungle people fear us and reverence us in equal parts. That is understandable. But I am not supernatural, nor a goddess. Helsee is the word for my people. My name is Azul. I am flesh like you."

"You're talking . . . in words, I mean. Not in my head, as you did before." His fear was shriveling now in the face of her obvious efforts to understand him and have him understand her. "You're speaking my language!"

"Yes. Well enough, I hope, that you can understand me. It was not easy to learn the way. We do not speak as you, with a word-sound for everything. We use shaped sounds, words, to focus on, to point, to identify and to make symbols. Names. But the rest, the emotion and coloring, we do that directly from one to another. It took me a long time to understand that your kind do not use this way of feeling together. Is it true that your kind have no way of sharing feelings at all?"

"No, that's not quite true. We do have a kind of empathy, sometimes, not very well understood. It's seen in a crowd, in a panic, sometimes in a theater, an emotional rapport. But it comes and goes, and nobody knows a great deal about it. There are some people, there always have been a few, who've claimed to know what other people were feeling. A kind of sympathy. How true that is I don't know. As for me, I've never had anything like that, not until I came here and found that I could . . . feel, along with those you call the jungle people. I've certainly never been able to do it with anybody else. If anything I understand them less than they understand each other. A kind of odd man out."

"Ah!" she made a fractional nod. "Then it is as I thought. You are not like the other ones. I suspected as much."

"The others? Good God!" He knew sudden chagrin and shame. "What about the other two? Christine and her father? What about them?"

"Do not excite yourself too much. They are well now. For a time they had the digestive sickness that you had

but not so severely as you had it, nor did it take them so long to recover. It seems you are different from them in constitution as well as mind."

"For a time?" he echoed. "And they are all right now?"

"They are well and fit, quite happy. I have taken care of that. I instructed the jungle people in the proper diet: certain fruits and leaves, and that fermented juice they had given you. And as soon as they were well enough I had them properly paired and involved in the . . . word? You have a word for a group of people who are interrelated? Family?"

Query stared at her in bewilderment and growing unease. "You had them paired? Involved in the tribe? In God's name, how long have I been here?"

She frowned now, no more than a small wrinkle of her brow. "That is a very difficult question. We do not have this concept of time as you do, as measurement." She lifted her hands from her knees and put them palm to palm in front of her. "There is now, this moment. There is that moment which is gone," she moved her left hand away to the side, "and all the other moments before that. And the moment which is not yet come, and all the moments yet to come after that," away went her right hand. "But when you say how long, I cannot tell you. As long as my arm or my leg? Or from this hand to the other one?" She spread her arms wide now, then returned them to her knees. "I cannot tell you how long. Enough that they are well and fit, that you are well and fit also, enough that I have had time—that word—to study how you speak. That is how long."

Query sagged, his mind groping for clues and finding none. "You're sure they are well and healthy?"

"Quite sure. And now you are distressed enough. You must eat and drink with me, and then we will sleep and gain more strength." She rose from her chair and held out her hand to him. He got up unsteadily and took a step toward her, then another, and it was as if he hadn't moved in months.

"Of course I'm distressed!" he protested, as she took his fingers. "They must be worried stiff about me. Do they know about me? That I am here with you, I mean?"

"I cannot reach them as I reach you. They are different.

Come, it doesn't matter so long as they are happy." She led him on unsteady legs out of one chamber and into another, and he had the impression of going around a corner. This was a bigger space, where the walls were a living curtain of flowering shrubs, all quietly glowing and there was a semicircular niche with a ledge and a dark red covering on it, just the right height to sit on. She stretched out comfortably at one extremity of the arc, obviously meaning him to copy her, but he was struck by an anomaly. The red stuff was a soft cushioning layer, as he touched it. Something like that had been on his bed, too, where he had slept.

"A cushion. Some kind of material. On this planet?"

"No, not as you think it. Sit and we will discuss it while we eat and drink." He sat, and goggled as the leaves above her rustled and a bulbous fruit-head leaned out and into her hand. She squeezed gently, so that the tip popped open, and drank of the contents. He looked up and ducked as a similar one offered itself to him. There were also pulp fruits and nuts, all tastily edible, even if he did occasionally feel he was eating something alive. "Yours must be a strange world," she suggested, "where half of everything is dead, and you must wrap your bodies in stuff for protection and to keep warm. Dead, here, means that brief moment when anything ceases to grow and thus dissolves back into the whole."

"Then this stuff," he prodded the *cushion*, "is alive?"

"It is all part of my tree. My home."

"This . . . is a tree?" He stared around in sudden enlightenment. "We are inside it. You live in it. Then it wasn't a dream?"

"It is better to say that I live with my tree. We share. All life is sharing, all part of the same living energy. Your world is very different from mine, but *we* are alike in that much. Alike in shape, design and function, in almost everything except a few ideas."

"Not function," he was quick to disagree. "We don't have anything like your mind reading ability. Nor can we fly, or was that a dream I had?"

"You mean this?" and he choked on a mouthful as she floated up into the air, still easily reclining, to spin lazily and come erect with her feet inches from the floor. Then,

breathtakingly and beautifully, she floated into a slow dance, swaying and gliding, turning and spinning, and in a moment or two he realized that she was executing all the classical poses of ballet, the points, the jeté, the arabesque, ciseaux, all in mid-air and with smooth grace. Then came some he had never seen, nor could imagine any ballerina achieving . . . and then, with a last dizzying spin, she settled on her seat again with that tiny frown of hers. "This is strange to you? But you had pictures like that in your mind!"

"Not like that!" he breathed. "Our dancers pretend to float like thistledown, but they are solid and heavy. They can't float."

"I am flesh," she said, "and solid. Heavy. You can float like that, if you think properly. It is all a matter of thinking the right way. You can learn, if you want to. I will teach you, if you will let me. For now, we have time for a few more questions, and then sleep. Ask me."

"I could ask a million," he confessed, his mind churning, "but I'm still concerned about my friends. You said paired and involved with the family. At a guess, didn't you mean integrated?" He had that creepy sense of fingers in his mind, and then she nodded. And then, fearfully, he asked, "What do you mean, paired?"

"Paired? Should I have said mated? Matched together, male and female? The polarization of opposites. For health and happiness! Surely something so fundamental to life must be familiar to you?"

X

QUERY WAS SO SHAKEN as to be speechless for a long while. And then, "You mean . . . Christine is living with one of the native men and Evans with one of the women?"

"Of course!" she looked really puzzled now. "How else could they be brought back to health and how else kept healthy? It is understandable that you have strong feelings about this, because this is the prime force, the fountain of life for all things. But I do not understand why you are

distressed. I repeat, how else can one achieve properly balanced health and happiness? It was necessary, just as it was necessary for us, you and I. How else could I have helped you back into health and strength?"

He goggled at her again. "You . . . and me? Then *that* wasn't a dream either? You and me?"

"Of course not. It was necessary."

Fragments of his dreams came back to him, and he started to burn and feel uncomfortable. "That was a hell of a thing to do," he blurted, "just . . . just for the good of my health! Just for that!"

She was still puzzled. "It was not something that I did *for* you. It was a sharing, a union of energies. There is something I do not understand here. Will you permit me to look into your thoughts?"

"I can't stop you," he mumbled, and felt really naked, now.

"You can and do stop me at any time you wish. Did you know that?"

"But you've been making free with my mind for a long while!"

"Not like that. Please, allow me to explain. Look, this is my arm, my hand, my leg, my body. You understand? There is also my brain, in here." She touched her head lightly. "And all my memories, values, ideas and concepts . . . is that right? But they are all mine, they are not me. How do I explain that? Do you have a word?" She was leaning forward now, animated, really intense in this search after an idea, and he was thrilled by the sheer force that came across from her. It struck a chord in him in a way no one else had ever done. This was the kind of problem he was always tangling with and never able to work out.

"I think you mean ego. Personality. Identity. We have lots of words like that, but they aren't very clear. It's difficult to pin a word on to something that we can't identify in any way except to say that it is. It exists, without properties or qualities."

"Ah!" she said, and smiled; and he saw that her teeth were just as perfect and white as the rest of her. But she wasn't white now. She was all at once intensely alive and a faint rose pink touched her skin from the inside,

transforming it. The smile was a dazzle, too, making his heart lift. "Ah!" she said again, "but the I-me ego does have a property. A power. It can choose. I can choose what I do, what I do not do, what I think is good, is bad, is important or never mind, what I want, what I do not want. All those other things are mine, but I choose what I will do with them."

"That's a good point," he admitted, "but it's not enough. I mean, I might choose to do all sorts of things and not be able to do them!"

"It is still a choice, but now it becomes a desire and then an act. A striving. You struggle with all your power—or, perhaps, you give up, but it rests on a choice. You see? And nothing else can choose!"

"That's not right either," he came back at her. "I might choose not to eat and get away with it for a while, but my body will win out in the end, when I get really hungry."

"That depends," she smiled more radiantly, "how strong you are. If you really want to starve to death, you can do it. But enough of that, we are agreed on this thing, let us call it your word, Ego. You. When you were asleep I looked into your mind. Yes, but only into your memories and your action patterns. Words. Values . . . a little. Ideas . . . some of those. But not all. Only those I needed to learn your speech and to make you fit and well, and that part was simpler than I had expected, because you and I are so much alike. And nowhere in those areas was there any barrier to me. Do you understand that? I cannot touch what is closed to me. No one can. It is choice again, you see? If there are things that you choose to keep to yourself, as part of you, then I cannot intrude, nor can anyone else. Just as, if you had not wanted to become well, nothing I did would have been of any use. It is like that!"

He was fascinated by the way she had come to life, by the tremendous vitality that warmed him, stirred his blood, as if she was reaching out to hold him physically. And yet there was nothing contrived about it. He had the complete conviction that if he had been able to look into her mind, as she could see into his, he would have seen it

all open and free from any kind of pretense. He felt afire and humbled at the same time.

"All right," he said, nerving himself. "You've persuaded me. Go ahead and look." But her smile went away now, and she was calm again.

"Not like that. Not in fear and determination. Let me see, but only because I am curious, because I want to help, because I am interested—not because I am persuading you against your will."

"All right," he whispered. "I trust you."

Now, like a lamp lighting up, her smile was a radiance. And he felt the delicate touch of feather fingers, a tickle in his mind, and watched her face anxiously, trying to sense her emotions, if any. Her smile faded away slowly into a curiously guarded expression, for all the world as if she was trying to conceal amusement. And then a small frown set two tiny lines between her eyes, and she sighed.

"You," she said, very softly, "are confused. It is understandable. It can be cleared away. We are even less different than I thought. So very simple. Who would have thought that something so simple could make such a confusion. But never mind, that can wait." She gave him a sudden smile that rocked him with its undertones of mischief and then was serious again. "It is the other two. I may have made a mistake about them. I think not, but there is one way to make sure. I have told you I cannot reach into their minds as I do with you. They are different. Closed up. They are all ego, clutching everything to themselves. But perhaps I can reach them a little through you. Come!"

She rose and led him back to the room he had awakened in, over to the bed he had slept on. There was that same resilient red surface here.

"Lie down!" she ordered gently. "Stretch out! Move further along . . . there!" and as he shifted along she sat, turned, and stretched herself out by his side. He tensed, his heart coming up in his throat as he felt her body warm and silky against his, as she slid her arm under his head. "Hold me," she whispered. "Very close. Tight. Good. Now, shut your eyes and see through mine. You can. Just want to!"

And, all at once, he could. Blurrily at first, but then

more clear, he seemed to be a bodiless vision, swooping through the dark green gloom at breathtaking speed, suddenly and startlingly to leap into hard focus. And he knew, without knowing how, that he was looking out of the eyes of the head man of the jungle tribe. Only dimly was he aware of Azul's hand finding his and bringing it to her breast, of her warmth pressing close to him. All the rest of his consciousness looked out of those eyes, saw the steep and tortuous gorge that led up to the home site, and surveyed the rest of the party with competent care. There was the sense of partial success, a good hunt, a capture of a brood of little running things, something like pigs. And weary anticipation after a hard effort. Nearly home now. One last look to make sure everyone was present, even though he could sense them all . . . except one. Mark him with care. Turn and stare. And Query gasped mentally, as a cheery, ruddy, grinning face showed up back there.

Old Evans, beyond doubt, but leaner and fitter than he remembered. Younger, too, by the look. And with a stuck carcass slung over a shoulder, and a tube-weapon tucked under his arm. But now, as the head man, he faced forward and tramped the last few yards up to the flat, into that warm and welcome breeze and sight of the pool and the waterfall. Homel And here came the swarm of old men and women, toddlers, young ones, all eager to grab food and carry it off. And there went old Evans, grabbing and hugging a laughing and comely native woman who was obviously glad to see him back. A happy sight. Query warmed to it, to the way the others met and embraced. And then he sensed a special warmth as one woman sorted herself out of the rest. Taller than the others, lithe and lovely as she ran with arms outstretched . . . and Query caught his breath. It was Christine, but this was Christine transformed, lovely and alive as an Amazon, her full-bosomed curves more glorious than ever, as firm and inviting as any young girl's. She would have passed for a delicious eighteen as she ran to hurl herself at the head man and hug him . . . and the instinctive emotional reaction struck through Query like a flame . . . and in that same instant the vision was gone and he was back in his own awareness.

And aware that he was clutching Azul tightly to him-

self. And that she was responding, hugging him with equal fervor, the same primitive heat coursing through that perfect body of hers, setting fire to it, and sharing that fire with him. Her lips brushed his cheek, her quiet voice whispering.

"Give me that strength of yours, Stephen Query, and take mine in return, that we may both be renewed and made strong." And then she had captured his mouth, his heart, all his emotions in an embrace that swept him away and shook him, lifted him as never before. But then, somehow, it was as if they both abandoned those interlocked bodies that came together and struck life energy from each other . . . left them somewhere below, exulting, and he and she went away somewhere else, somewhere quiet and immaterial, where it was just her mind and his in close conversation. And that hint of mischief.

You are confused. Why do you think unfair of me?

You caught me unaware. I had no real choice!

Come now, will you pretend that you do not want this? Will you try to pretend that, now? Here?

And "here" there could be no pretense, for it was just his mind and hers merging intimately. He confessed, *Yes. I want it, but somehow . . . not just like this. It's not enough. You are truly a beautiful woman, and desirable, and I'm a man, and subject to instincts which I can't deny. But it isn't enough, just like that. For me there should be something more!*

Then he was aware of her amusement, warm and kind, without mockery. *There is your confusion. Let me help. It is such a little thing, after all. Remember what we said. It is my body, and your body. Instruments which serve us, which have needs and appetites if they are to remain healthy and serve us properly. You understand that?*

Of course I do, that's the whole point. This kind of relationship should be something more than just physical. That's the way we humans feel it ought to be. We don't often achieve it, but that's what we strive for and hope for. That's the ideal we aim at. Does that mean anything to you?

Very much! there was warm tenderness now in her thought. *We are not so different, after all. Listen . . . just now, when we saw your friends, when you saw them*

through my eyes . . . I saw into them a little. And I saw into you a great deal, much more than before. And now. I am touching you now, where before I could reach only your memories and effects, because you were asleep. And I am amazed and impressed that your kind have somehow understood, without knowing how, have struggled for something you could not really grasp . . . simply because you cannot, yet, separate the ego-self from everything else. That woman . . . for a moment I knew her, knew that she was thinking of what you call love. That was a word I found in your mind and could not properly understand.

We've never properly understood it either, but it's not . . . just what we are doing, what our bodies are doing now!

Again she was amused, but still kind. Of course not. Love is something quite different from the meeting and mating of healthy bodies. It is different. For you, too, it is something more than that, but because you cannot separate the two, you confuse one with the other and try to achieve one by means of the other. And they are quite different. You must accept that for now, until you come to learn it for yourself.

Completely different?

As different as a thought is from the object you think of, but related in the same way. Think of a tree, and your thought includes everything that is or can be a tree, and all trees. But a tree is a single thing, which grows and dies, has leaves and trunk and branches and is different from any other tree. Your thought is not a tree; "tree" is different but related. Think of me . . . or yourself . . . and your thought is different from the flesh and blood and bones, the face, form and figure of the body. The ego-you is different from the body, but dependent on it, and related to it. The meeting and mating of healthy bodies of polar opposite sex is the origin and source of all living energy, of living creation. Without it there can be no life. But love is something different.

Can I learn to love you, Azul? And you to love me?

You are not ready to know the answer to that yet, Stephen. When the time comes, you will know. For now, let us enjoy our pleasures, share our delights, renew our energies, so that we may both become healthy and happy

and strong. It has taken much of my life force to bring you to this point. Now you must yield it back to me and regain your own!

He didn't understand her altogether, but enough to know that she seemed to know what she was doing, and why, and that there was nothing wrong. Time ceased to have any meaning for him. Quickly forgotten was his first overwhelming impression of her statuelike imperiousness, her remote perfection. She was as warm and human and demanding as any woman might be, and all the more perfect for that, growing lovelier every moment in his sight. And she had humor. She learned to play tricks with his words and ideas, to joke with him and trap him into inconsistencies and contradictions. And to laugh, gloriously, at his confusion, but never with malice.

She was full of questions, too; keen and shrewd questions sometimes, naïve and wondering ones at other times. It was his pleasure, once he had learned how, to let her see through his thinking such of humanity's gifts and accomplishments as he had seen, either in the flesh or in pictures. By the mere touching of hands he could take her through the great galleries and museums and palaces, show her scenery such as she had never seen, and vast cities as he had seen them from the air. And music. Always a lover of great music, he was able to re-create for her and share with her the great masterworks of the past, and she could never have enough of it. When he saw her eyes shine and her whole superb body quiver and glow rose red to the soaring chords of some mighty orchestra, he was quietly amazed that he had ever thought her stern and white and aloof. She was the most vibrantly alive person he had ever known.

And he came to know her a little, to ask questions of her about her people, her kind, her life. He learned to look into her mind just a little, to catch just something of the wonder of it as she told him things, carefully so that he could understand. Her people had lived in and with trees ever since anyone could remember. They were many, but they were widely scattered, in isolation, all over the planet. They could be in touch with each other at any time, instantly. They were always in touch with the living force of any growing thing, sharing something with it. He learned

something of that, how to know a plant, a bush, a tree, and how to persuade it to respond to his wish as far as it had the power. There was wisdom in her beyond all words and that he learned, in part, without words. But there were, too, whole areas of thought in her that he didn't touch and didn't ask about, sensing in some way that they were not for him, that he was not yet ready. And in that there was more than a hint of sadness, of time that had to run out.

One delight, and a great frustration at the same time, was her power to fly. She took him flying often, with no more effort than the firm touch of her hand in his. He was nervous only the first time, for the first giddy, breathtaking moment that they stood off from the branch outside her door and swooped away through the forest. After that, it was sheer delight to race in the mist, hand in hand, to plunge dizzily deep down into the gloom and then soar up again, up and up until the air was thin and chill and full of a red glow that was the furthest the sun could penetrate. She confessed to him frankly that to share his delight in this was to recapture something for herself, that she had been able to do it so long and had taken it for granted, but now she was learning the thrill of it all over again through him.

"In learning about you," she said, "I have learned about myself, too, and for that I owe you very much." But he couldn't learn the trick of lifting himself like a feather through the air no matter how he tried. And he did try, as hard as he knew how. But that was a minor flaw among such a wealth of delight, and he didn't complain about it. Most of all, and with no reservations at all now, he treasured those moments, and there were very many of them, when the quick flame would rise in her, the blushing color would come to warm and suffuse her loveliness, and instantly light the same eager fire in him. Then her eyes would glow and she would stretch out her arms to take him and hold him close. No words were ever needed now. There was total understanding and sharing between them, a complete sharing of need and surrender, of delight and interplay, stirring and stimulating each other to a pitch of rapture that always seemed too wonderful to be real, but was always even more wonderful with each eager renewal.

Until the time came when her leaping ardor seemed to break every restraint and swept him away into a madness that was beyond anything he had ever imagined, a height that was terrifying and yet wonderful, so that he lost all sense of reality and was reluctant to drift back when at long last the fury was spent in both of them. It was as if some ultimate bond had broken, some new level of understanding had opened up. He lay by her side a long while, just content to be at peace. But there was something he had to say, now, like it or not. "Azul," he whispered, "there's a purpose in all this. A reason. Isn't it time that I knew what it is?"

"Yes," she sounded sad, "it is time. Now."

XI

HE RAISED HIMSELF on an arm to look down into her lovely face, one finger lightly caressing the chiseled perfection of her shoulder.

"I think I've known all along that you had some reason for bringing me here other than just simple curiosity. You've never spoken of it, and I haven't asked, because I wanted to go on pretending to myself for a bit more time. You're not just curious about me and my kind, in the general sense. There's more to it than that. What?"

He knew beyond all doubt that he was touching something cloudy in her mind, a region obscure to him. In everything else he was free to walk in and out of her mind at will. But not this. She smiled up at him, but there was a tinge of regret in her expression, almost a sadness.

"You are strong now. Strong and clear. Strong enough, and ready, as I knew you would be. Truly, I, too, have been surrendering a little to pretense, to dreams, to happiness for its own sake, and the time for that is over. It is true, Stephen, that I brought you here to study you, originally from sheer curiosity. I have learned much about you and your kind, some good, some bad. Much of what I have learned puzzles me, some delights me."

"I've had delights, too."

"I'm glad of that. If I have been able to give you strength, health, some knowledge, a little pleasure, you have given me back much more than I gave you. I needed the strength in you, the truth in you, and that has helped to make me whole again. In that there is a kind of justice."

"Justice? I don't understand you."

"You will." She became frighteningly remote and stern now, all without so much as a breath of change in her appearance. "Tell me . . . I ask you for the first time . . . about that spot on our planet that you of Earth have made your private place. Tell me about it."

In that instant Query switched from living in Paradise to being just an ordinary man, a trained man in a military service. Caution bloomed in him.

"I can't tell you that, Azul. You shouldn't ask."

"I could compel you."

"You'd have to, but I don't think you will. I think I've learned to know you that well. If you do compel me, force me to tell the things I have no right to tell, then what happens to the understanding we have, and all the fine talk about you not being able to enter anywhere in my mind that I don't want to admit you?"

"Tell me, Stephen."

"I can't. I don't expect you to understand what a military secret is, and Lord knows I've no special reason to support military ethics, but there are men in there. Men, like me. I have to think of them, not just myself."

"You would consider the many in preference to yourself?"

"I have to. I don't know why. Part of being human, I suppose. I've no choice, Azul."

"Nor have I," she said and smiled, again with a touch of sadness, "as you may discover. But now it is time for the Thing. It has been held off too long." She closed her eyes a moment and "went away," to return just as instantly and mysteriously. "It is time. The family are at feast, just as they were when I first found you."

"That's something you've never explained."

"It is part of our function, each one of us Helsee, to watch over a family or, as you call it, a tribe. We watch over, guide and advise and help. And, rarely but very precious, we sometimes find the newborn that is destined to become one of us."

"Don't you, the Helsee, have children of your own?"

"It has happened but very rarely indeed. For us, Stephen, it has to be the perfect matching of minds, and that is so rare as to be almost impossible. You see, it is a question of ego again. The fully developed ego is a unique thing, a complete identity, and thus almost inevitably different from any other." She smiled again, clasped his hand to her breast warmly. "Sharing our bodily delights is good, is re-creating energy and life force. That is within the capacity of any healthy organism. But a complete sharing and polarization of minds is infinitely more wonderful. And rare. You and I could never create a child . . . in that much we are forever alien . . . but you have come into my mind and fired it and filled it in a way that I would never have dreamed of . . . but I must say no more of that, for there is a decision to be made that is not for me to prejudge. How I found you? I was watching over my family. I sensed strangers. In a while I grew so curious that I had to look closer. And there you were. It is enough."

She stirred now, put away his arms gently and stood, holding out her hand to him. Again he had that awareness that she had "gone away" just for a moment. And then she smiled. "Come," she said, "it is time. We will go and collect your friends from the feasting."

She led him away through a door that was curtained with creepers and out on to the broad branch from which they had started out on many a flight. But this was different. All at once he realized just how much of a prisoner he was. The ground was unthinkably far below. He could never have climbed down there unaided, and even if he could have managed it, where would he run to? With her hand in his he could fly better than any bird, but by himself he was helpless. Trapped. He held her hand tight, felt lightness flow into him, and they lifted away and up. Her face was calm now, indrawn and inscrutable, and once again she was pearly white, all aglow. He felt fear but not from the whirling flight, the swift cleaving of the mist. That was familiar and a delight. The forest slid past. They spun high and swooped, arrowing down like striking falcons, deep into the dark steam heat of the jungle, into the coiling, swirling mist, following the invisible thread of her mind.

And now he could sense it, the many minds in concert, the rhythm of the beat and the chant. And there in a distant glow of rainbow color, a many hued fire, was the steep hillside and the caves, the rippling pool, and the jungle people all gathered in that ritual semicircle, chanting and clapping, bathed in the colorful glow. Query felt a strange pang. How long had it been since he had sat there and been awed by that native miracle? Azul slowed now, and her pearly radiance spread out to wrap both of them in a blaze of cold light.

"When we go down," she said, "you will call your friends. I still cannot reach into them as I do with you. I can compel them by physical force, but I would rather not do that. You will call them."

And once again he heard that awed, many throated cry as the damp, warm turf became solid under his feet.

"Hel-seeeeeee! Hel-seeeeeee!"

Azul released his hand, stood a moment, then spread her arms. The adulation ceased at once. The silence was absolute.

"Call them," she said softly.

"For what?" he muttered. "What are you going to do to them?"

"There is to be a judgment. A fair judgment, Stephen. Trust me."

"That's easy to say, but what's going to happen?"

"First I must undo what I have already done."

"To them? You've done something to them? You told me . . ."

"That I could not reach them as I do you. That is true. But I was able to cushion things for them a little."

"What's that mean?"

"I was able to cast a blanket over those parts of their minds and memories to do with your kind of civilized life. This to protect them from constant humiliation and strain. To make them happy with their lot."

"My God, you've made them into animals!"

"Not so!" she was stern. "My people are not animals. They are simple and unspoiled primitives, yes, but not animals. They have a dignity which your kind lacks. They have a zest for life which your kind seems to lack also."

Query had to be honest. Thinking back to his own ad-

miration for the happy native peoples he felt a trifle ashamed of his anger. But he couldn't feel happy about any kind of mental tampering. She must have sensed what he thought to a degree.

"There has been no harm, Stephen. It has been as if their civilized minds were asleep, nothing more than that. Otherwise they could not have integrated happily into the family. But now, when you call them, I will lift the veil from their minds and they will be as they were before. They will be pleased to see you again."

"Maybe. You still haven't said what it's all for, this judgment."

"Only for good, Stephen. On that you must trust me. I cannot tell you more. I have my rules also. Trust me, Stephen!"

"It doesn't look as if I have any choice!" he sighed, and stood away from her, peering into the gloom, the blue green light that was darker than he had remembered it. But he had developed more senses than just sight, and he was soon able to pick them out.

"Admiral Evans! Christine! It's me, Stephen Query. Would you come here, please?"

He watched, as Evans gently disengaged himself from the embrace of an awed native woman and came slowly forward, staring. An old man still but not flabby anymore; he was lean and with a spring in his step and a glow of health to his skin. And here came Christine, strikingly tall and rounded against the slighter native women. She, too, was vibrant with good health and lovelier than he had ever imagined her.

"Query? Is it you?" The old man stuck out a fist. "By God, it's a pleasure to see you and to hear civilized speech again. Looking fit. We thought you were dead long ago. Dead. Carried off. Eh?"

"Not dead, sir. Flesh and blood, as you can feel. You're looking well, too. Years younger and fit!"

"Hah!" the old man grinned, not displeased. "It's a rough life, takes a bit of getting used to, but there wasn't much choice. We had to muck in with the rest. They're a good bunch. Live hard, play hard. It would be damned dull if the people weren't so friendly, eh, Christine?"

"Hello, Stephen!" she said, taking his hand and gripping

it hard, coming close to smile radiantly at him. "I never thought to see you again. I'm so glad you're all right. You look very well!"

"We were sick, you know, Query. Sick, damned near died, both of us. But these people took care of us, saved our lives. Good people!"

"I must say you both look very well now. Full of beans!" Query was groping for words, aware of their banality yet shaken by the nearness of Christine, and the tremendous vitality that emanated from her presence. It was a totally different feeling from the fire that Azul stirred in him, but almost as powerful in its way. "This life seems to agree with you," he said.

"Damned little choice, Query. Thought it over. You were right. No hope of rescue at all. So we had to make the best of it."

"Yes." Christine nodded. "There was nothing else to do. And there have been some compensations. The primitive!" She smiled thoughtfully. "We talked about that, remember? But you look different, too. Where have you been all this time? Have you come back for good? And who's that?" Her voice fell to a whisper as she glanced furtively over his shoulder.

"You see her, too?" Evans muttered. "I thought she was some kind of spook! You get to seeing things like that here."

"No spook!" Query said hurriedly. "I haven't the time now to explain it all. She's one of the rulers, the upper-people . . . something like that. Anyway, we've come to collect you. There is going to be a meeting, some kind of council of the rulers. And all three of us have to be there. I don't know a lot about it myself, frankly. But come and meet her anyway." He turned and went back to where she stood, quiet and patient.

"Azul of the Helsee. This is Gareth Evans. And Christine Evans." They came uncertainly near, made no attempt to put out their hands in any formal greeting, and he couldn't blame them. He had grown accustomed to her transcendent beauty, her statuesque presence, but now, just for a moment, he saw her afresh, as they must be seeing her, and it was no wonder they were awed. Her radiance grew stronger, her yellow gold eyes afire.

"You will stand on either side of him," she said quietly, "and hold hands. Have no fear. Now!"

Query grasped their hands firmly and whispered, "It's all right, there's nothing to worry about. You just hold on to me."

Azul moved now, came to stand before him, her golden eyes steady on his. Then she raised her hands and placed one on each shoulder, grasping him firmly. "It is time!" she said.

Query felt that familiar sensation of inflowing lightness, as if his veins ran with air, but this time there was no lifting up, no flight, nor any swooping. There was just a moment of strain, of spinning vertigo, and then she nodded and took her hands away and stepped back clear from him. Then she turned away and lifted her chin to look up.

"They are here, oh Helsee! Will you now hear me?"

Her voice rang out like a silver trumpet, stirring pin-points of rich color all around, and Query gaped in astonishment as he took in the scene. The three humans stood in a natural clearing, a glade, on soft turf, and all around reared the giant columns of mighty trees, a ring of giants that stood up into the mist, far above into the dark. There was a sense of being in an immense cathedral. And the trees were full of angels.

The simile came into his mind without thought. A moment of reason told him that this was nothing more than a vast concourse of Helsee, Azul's fellows, but the manner of their presence, the way they hung and perched up there, decorating all the nearer branches, and each and every one of them radiant with white light—they were angels. Or demons?

"My God!" Evans breathed. "They are spooks! Millions of them up there. What the hell is this, Query? What's it all about?"

"I don't know any more about it than you do, nor did I have any more choice than you. Except that I know this. We're going to get told."

"Stephen!" Christine huddled close, gripping his hand. "I'm scared. What's going to happen? Who are . . . all those?"

"Grand assembly of all the Helsee," he muttered. "I'm

scared, too. Azul said something about a judgment. Feels more like a trial to me!"

He was aware of a vast whispering chorus of minds touching his, of to-and-fro argument, of decision . . . that Azul should proceed.

"My people," she began, and still her voice rang out but not so loudly now. "You know me as I think and feel, as I know you, but so that these three may also know and understand, I will speak as they speak, the which I have learned to do from that one of the three who is very much akin to us in mind. And with your patience, I must first explain."

She turned again to face her human audience. "You need to know that we Helsee have lived here on this planet long. It is our home. It is our way, we of the Helsee, to live on the high ground in and with trees, and the trees bear us and house us and we live in them. The other ones, those you know of and have lived with, are kin to us and we to them, and we care for them and protect them, and they live down there in the jungle. We are all one kind, sharing life in peace. Until you came.

"Then, out of the darkness beyond the sky there came a great noise and a great light and a great consuming heat such as we have never seen before. And everything that was in its way, that was struck by that heat, shriveled and withered and died in great pain and hurt. And that was on a high place where the tree stood that was my home, where I lived. By chance I was distant from my home, caring for some of my people. By chance only, or I would not now be here speaking to you. Is this understood?"

Query made an urgent step forward, staring at her. "We all understand," he said, "what you've just explained. Quite clearly. What you do not know, and what you have to believe, is that we didn't know . . . we had . . ."

"Hold it!" Evans spoke up gruffly, sounding like a man awakening from a daze. "Hold on there, Query." He came forward now to push past and confront Azul; and then to throw his head back and stare up at the host of radiant Helsee. "I don't properly understand what this is all about yet, but I know this. If anybody was responsible, it wasn't him. It was me!"

"You have no need to shout," Azul corrected him gently. "Just speak to me and they will know what is said."

Query stepped back wryly. Old Gravel Guts, who claimed he was a fair man, a just man. And here he was, determined to prove it. And his shoulders were square, his back straight as he eyed Azul.

"All right, ma'am, I'll say it again. It happened as you say, but I was the one responsible. I gave the order."

She was quite calm and not angry, as she had some right to be. Query couldn't touch her at all. It was as if she had retired inside some barrier that insulated off her emotions.

"Is it true, as he said, that you did not know you were creating great damage and pain and death?"

"It's the truth. According to the best of our scientific knowledge, it's impossible for any kind of life as we know it to exist on this planet of yours. I know that's all wrong now, but I didn't know it at the time."

Her eyes flicked to Query and there was an unspoken but crystal clear question in them. He nodded and spoke aloud for the benefit of the others.

"That's quite true, Azul. According to the best we knew, life of any advanced nature is impossible here. Stupid, but there it is."

"Very well, but that calls the next question. If you knew, or you believed, that there was no intelligent life here, why did you attack us so violently, so savagely? Why?"

"It was no attack, ma'am. Nothing like that at all." Evans shook his head, turned in appeal to Query. "Does she understand what a war is?"

"I think so, sir. I've told her quite a bit about us, how we go on, the things we do."

"All right." The old man turned back to her. "We are fighting a war, ma'am. Earth, the planet we live on, is a long way from here, a very long way. And the people we are fighting live on a planet of another star that is even further away in the opposite direction. And all we needed was a place where we could stop off and rest and do repairs on the journey. That's all it was. And we picked this planet on purpose, because we were sure there was nothing here that anybody could want, nothing here to be

upset or disturbed. Just a place to stop over. And I'm responsible. I'm the one who gave the order. And that's it, ma'am. If anybody has to take the knock for it, I'm the one."

"That was direct," she said, "and, I believe, true. But those were only words. For my people, there must be more. Stephen . . ." her eyes came to Query again, ". . . will you come to me, please?"

He went forward to her and she reached out and took his hand. There was a slight smile on her lips.

"Do not be afraid, Stephen. You have allowed me to share your mind many times. I know what is there, very well. Now, I ask you, open your mind to me . . . and to the others, that they may see and be sure. Will you, hiding nothing, fearing nothing?"

It cost him a moment of terror, but the grip of her hand was a great strength, and he nodded, at last. "Whatever you ask, Azul."

She smiled again, turned away, still holding his hand, to look up at her fellows. "This one I know. From him I have learned much. He is so much like us, that he is like the other half of myself. Look now into his mind as I have done and see . . ." and Query shivered as there came the uncanny tickling touch of thousands of minds peering into his. The sweat started out on his flesh, but her hand held fast and was firm.

"Now," she said, "I will ask him, and you shall read for yourselves. Stephen, it was true that your kind did not know of us, meant us no harm."

"True. No one suspected there was intelligent life here. In fact, if it was possible for me to tell anyone, our scientists, right now . . . they wouldn't believe me!"

"Very well. And it was true then, that this one here was responsible for all of it? That he is, or was, a person with great power and authority, who could give such a command?"

"Go on, tell her!" Evans growled, as Query hesitated.

"It was true. That is the way we do. I've told you about that. We have organizations and people with power and people in charge of others. He was the man in power, at the top. But . . . Azul . . . he didn't know!"

"It is enough." She turned away from him again. "You have heard and seen. What say you?"

Query waited in grim despair, trying to sense the concourse of thought, wondering what the verdict would be, feeling a Judas. Invisible lightning flickered in and about his head. And then there came a question, one he couldn't quite catch until Azul put it into words for him, although she spoke now to Evans.

"You were in authority. You had power. Would you still hold that power, now, if we were to return you to your own kind?"

XII

"I DON'T SEE WHY NOT!" Evans declared promptly. "They might have written me off as dead by now, but that . . . what did you say?" His tone altered dramatically as the impact of her words got through. "You mean . . . you can return us . . . to where we came from?" The shaking eagerness in his voice made Query ache inside, as, too, the way Christine suddenly started forward, her eyes shining, her whole body quivering in hope.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Can you? Will you?"

"We have that power."

"To get back to civilization!" Evans muttered. "That would be . . . they will have written all of us off as dead long ago, but we can soon put that right. I'm not dead, damnit! I'd soon convince them!" But then his attitude altered subtly, and he stared at Azul. "You say you have the power to return us. You didn't say that without reason, I'll bet. What's on the other end of that string? What do you want me to do?"

Query felt her fingers twitch, but her face was calm, still. She eyed Evans steadily. "We know a little of your human ways, by now. We are not vengeful as you are. What you did, you did in error and ignorance. We know that now. So we do not seek to punish. But we want you gone! We would have it that you go, as soon as possible, away from our home. To go and leave us alone. Leave our planet. Never more to return. Have you the power to achieve that?"

Evans nodded slowly. "I have that kind of authority, ma'am. You can bet on it. And I can appreciate the deal. Yes, I can shut down the base and finish it for good and all. It may take a while; there's a lot of stuff to shift, men to get away, time for the wheels to turn. But I can do it, and I will do it just as fast as ever it can be done . . . if you'll give me the chance."

"It's true," Query confirmed sadly. "He can do it."

"And more," Azul's voice grew stern, "that you will go and keep silent. You will tell no one, ever, of what is here, of what you have seen. No one! Ever!"

"That's something else again, ma'am." Evans set his jaw. "That's a lot more ground than I can cover. It's like this. Nobody is going to believe us if we try to tell them about you and all this. That is for sure. We are going to have a hard time explaining just how we come to be alive, never mind anything else. As for not talking, we won't. That's for me and Christine. And Query can speak for himself. But I have no way of knowing, nor yet of controlling, the forward march of science. There was one research team here before the war started. There might be others. In time there is a growing certainty there will be somebody snooping here just out of curiosity. I can't stop that. Nobody can. In fact, if I tried to, that would turn on the very thing you are hoping to avoid. That's the way it is. That's the truth, ma'am."

"That's quite true," Query confirmed, "every word."

Again there came that interplay of mind on mind, the invisible flashes of opinion and argument, the rustle of many minds in his, and then Azul nodded thoughtfully and smiled at the old man.

"Very well. We know what you mean by scientific research persons and explorations. We can deal with those in ways of our own."

"Then you are going to send us back?"

"It will be done. But know this!" Azul grew stern again. "We have the skills and abilities to employ energy violently, if we wish. We could have destroyed your settlement at any time. But that is not our way. So, we have your word that you will withdraw as soon as possible. Or we will, of ourselves, destroy you. Is that understood?"

"That's straight talk, ma'am, and I understand it. You

needn't worry; I'll have that base whipped out as fast as ever it can be done!"

"You really do want to go back, don't you?" Query looked at them, spoke only to them, knowing sadly what their answer would be. But he had to try. "Look at you," he said. "You're healthier, fitter, happier than you've ever been. It's all peaceful and quiet here. Beautiful, if you look at it right. And yet you want to go back?"

He felt Azul's hand slip away from his, and then Christine came up to him, to face him, to reach and touch his arm. "I missed you," she said, "so very much." The primitive heat from her was almost tangible. "I wanted you terribly. If you could only know how much. Someone human to talk to, to touch, to be with. But you weren't there. We were all alone. There were some good moments, even some happy ones. All those glorious colors. And the people were kind. When that was all there was, that was one thing. We had to make the most of it. You know? But now, with the chance to get back among real people again. To sunlight. And noise . . . and everything. It will be so good, Stephen. Can't you see that?"

She drew him despite himself. She was lovely, desirable, almost unbearably so . . . but it was all of the body, the flesh. Her mind was closed and impenetrable so far as he was concerned. There was nothing there he could share with. But he couldn't explain, any more than the blind can be expected to see color harmonies.

And then Evans growled: "We have a job to do, man. We owe it to these people to get out as fast as we can. We've promised that, and we're going to do it. You too. You're human, Query. You can't change that. You can't opt out of the race you were born into. You're one of us, on this side. They're on the other side. Take a look, man!" He gestured up at the hanging radiances that glowed in the tall trees. "That's not for you, for us. We don't belong!"

Query turned to look to Azul now, and for a timeless moment all her mind was open to him and his to her.

Must I go?

You are dear to me. I cannot say more. I must not influence you. In this I must obey the greater decision.

And what is that?

So long as your kind are on our world there can be nothing between us. A barrier has been set.

But . . . when they go, I must go with them. I have no choice. And it is not possible for me to return alone.

Then it must be so, Stephen. You must go!

It all happened in between one breath and the next, with no room for the futility of wordy argument.

Inside him something young and newborn whimpered, and then was silent as he suppressed it savagely. That was it, then. He was ready to go. But then her mind reached for him again, cleanly and strongly, to clasp him privately, shutting out all the others.

I cannot let you go like that, in pain and misunderstanding. Let me try again to explain how it must be.

Why not? I'll try to understand.

The mind flow from her was instant and so overwhelmingly large that it humbled him as he tried to grasp the concepts. *All life is one, Stephen. This whole planet is one living thing. From the tiniest airborne microbe to the wriggling worm in the mud, through each root, seed, plant, bush and tree and in everything that runs and fights and eats is one common thread. We are all one, made of many parts. Ripples on the vast sea of being.*

I know that thought. I've had it myself.

So . . . of all that life only a small part can attain consciousness, can become aware of itself, can understand and enjoy the knowledge of existence. I am one such part. In that much I am not free. I am a custodian of life. I owe it to all the rest to be to the utmost and share that being with all other life. Like an ambassador. A privilege that I share. Your kind has somehow lost that sharing thought. You ravage, burn, despoil and destroy . . . your own kind. When I say we cannot have your kind here, Stephen, it is not my voice but the voice of all. The whole planet.

But, Azul, you know that I'm not that kind!

I know, Stephen, but I am only a part. A branch that must wither so that the rest of the tree may live. You understand . . . ?

"All right," he said aloud, "I'm ready."

"You will hold hands," she said, "as before." And once again she came to stand in front of him, to gaze deeply

into his eyes, to lay her hands on his shoulders, and grip . . . and the image of her lovely face faded and grew dim, was gone . . . there was a moment of bright radiance . . . then darkness and steam heat and mud. He stood in mud up to his knees. Christine on one side of him, old Evans on the other. Hot mud. Ropy creepers, massive blue black tree boles . . . and there, just barely visible, the steel gray, sloping wall of the Dome. And the air lock that he knew so well.

"Come on," he mumbled, and slurped ahead through the mud onto the crusty part, and up to the Dome wall to lean on the switch.

"That was quite a trick!" Evans growled, following. "But hey! We can't just barge in like this. We're all stark!"

"That'll be all right." Query watched the door cycle open. "There'll be protective suits inside. There's always a few. There, look!" He pointed as they tramped inside and the door started closing again. It was like a scene from a forgotten world to see and feel those crackly suits. "Not yet," he cautioned. "Wait for the ultraviolet. Lord knows what we've got on our skins. Give it thirty seconds, that's the routine drill."

He felt ugly and tired as he struggled into a suit and fastened it up, watching the others. They left their helmets back and clear. He leaned on the switch of the inner door, watched it start to spin, and felt doom closing in on him. Back to the world of people, of fools, of dirt and noise and stupidity. Better far that he had died. The long forgotten smells came in, smells of people and plastic and oil. But silence where there should have been a busy clamor. There was no one about in the first space nor in the assembly space. But now he could hear distant voices, and he had a sense of urgency.

"Come on!" he ordered, and they ran after him as he made for the sounds. They seemed to emanate from the workshop dome, and he headed for that, noting as he ran how bare and deserted everything seemed to be. And so was the big dome when they reached it. Almost all the heavy machinery had gone, leaving only the scarred bases they had stood on. There were two men by the far air lock, that one which led to the external access tube. And it was open, so there was a ship out there. Two men. Ser-

geant Keast, instantly to be known by his grating rocks voice. And Commander Eldredge with him. And two more men sweating and wrestling a heavy and awkward crate into the air lock. And Keast helping them along with his caustic comments. Then Eldredge turned his head to see the newcomers and stared.

"C'mon! C'mon!" Keast grated. "Move it! We haven't got all day!"

"What the bloody hell are you three doing here?" Eldredge shouted. "You should have been clear half an hour ago . . . who the hell are you, anyway? And what the blazes are you doing in those . . . ?"

"Eldredge!" Evans roared. "Use your eyes, man! Don't you know who I am? Eh?"

The commander gaped, his jaw dropping visibly. "Good God!" he said, in a strangled voice. "It can't be! Admiral Evans? Is it? Sir?"

"Who else, damnit? And this is my daughter, Lieutenant Evans, and Sergeant Query. All right now?"

"But . . . but . . ." Eldredge struggled against it. "But you're dead! You've been dead more than eight months! Don't you remember . . . ?"

"Blast your eyes, do I look dead? Do these two look dead?"

Eldredge subsided into speechless gobble and Keast came in shakily. "We got the dope from Michaels, sir. Power repairman. Poor b . . . begging your pardon, sir. Power repairman Michaels, sir, he booby-trapped your drive heaters. He wrote it all out in a note, and then . . . he cut his throat, sir. That was . . . eight months . . . !"

"Well get a grip on yourselves, the pair of you. We are not dead, get that. The ship blew up all right, but we were able to eject, to come down safe and sound. And it has taken us this long to get back here. We have had a rough time, but we are not dead. We're alive. Get it!"

"You mean," Eldredge put a shaking hand to his head, "that you have been out there all that time? Out there in that hell mist?"

"We lost everything, sir." Query came in quickly, trying to be diplomatic and distractive. "Everything. We haven't a stitch of clothing between us. That's why we

had to put these suits on. That's the first thing we need. Clothing. And food!"

"Oh my God!" Eldredge seemed to snatch at something that galvanized him. "We haven't time for any of that now!" He leaned into the tube and bawled. "Rush it along you men, no time to hang about!" Coming back out again he said, "You'd better get along the tube, sir, right away. There's an 'L' Class monitor out there, waiting to lift off."

"Lift off?" Evans roared. "What the hell are you talking about? I don't want to be lifted off, damnit!"

"We have no choice, sir." Eldredge retorted. Query heard him, and from the stripped down appearance of the workshop dome he had a pretty good idea of what was coming next. "No choice. You see, sir, we are closing down this base. Step Two, sir. Closing down. The demolition charges are all set to blow in . . ." he shot a cuff and glanced at his watch and grew urgent, ". . . in ten minutes, sir!"

"Demolition? Who gave those orders, damnit? Why?"

"But . . . of course, you wouldn't know, sir. It's all over. The war. The Settlers' Uprising. All over. Honorable peace. About two months ago, nearly. We've been clearing out here for more than three weeks!"

It was Query's turn to stare, to catch Christine's eye in wonder.

"Isn't that wonderful news!" she cried and grabbed his arm. "You'll be out of the Service . . . and so will I. Oh, Stephen . . . we . . ."

"No!" He pulled away from her urgently. "No! It's all over. It's all done, the way they wanted it. It's done! I'm free!" He looked at her urgently, saw her bewilderment and understood it, knew that she could never feel the way he felt. "It's no good, Christine. You would never understand. I can't go back with you. I can't, not now. I'm free, don't you understand? All the humans will be gone, and I have no duty, not even to the Service. I'm free. Good-bye. Don't wait for me. I won't be coming, ever!"

And he turned away and ran, heavily in the crackly suit, back to the air lock and inside, dragging the thing off as he waited for the door to cycle shut and the outer door to open. The steamy heat swelled in to envelop him, and he ran out into it, into the mud and gloom, slopping and

stumbling until he knew he was well clear. The minutes were ticking away. He stood in mud up to his waist, alone in the blue green dark, and spread his arms, seeing her in his mind.

"Azull!" he cried out. "Azull! I can't go away and leave you! I need you! Azull! Help me!"

He felt horribly and terrifyingly alone. He wanted desperately to be able to fly to her, to soar like a bird, as she did. But he felt hot and heavy and afraid. "Azull" he cried again. "Azull! Help me!" But there was no help. He wanted her, right down into every fiber of his being and with all his mind. And suddenly he felt calm. "Azull!" he said, quite softly now. "I can. I know I can. If you want me to!"

And it came, that warmth, that different fire, like a siren song in his mind. The mud yielded. He felt light as air. He rose, unsteadily and heart-in-mouth anxiously, but he rose just the same. And then more surely, up and through the trees and away, cleaving the mist. Back there, down and below, came a sudden yellow flare and a shake of noise that climbed up and away in another direction, toward a different world. Then briefly after, a vast red ring of flame and another shaking of the air, which was the last of the marks of men. But he felt far away from that already, and speeding along a mental thread that drew him, certain and sure, to a special tree. And a branch to land on, and a flower curtain.

And there she stood, radiantly rosy, her eyes shining like golden stars, her arms outstretched to welcome him, to hold him tight.

It is done, Azull

Not done, Stephen. Only begun. My love!

Was I right to come back, Azul?

Need you ask that? You know all of me now. Rather is it for me to ask, am I worthy, that you should give up a whole world for me?

You are all the world I want or will ever need, Azul. Just you. All of you.

And you are all the world to me, Stephen. I am content!

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