Destiny Doll

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

COSMIC ENGINEERS

CITY (*International Fantasy Award, 1953*)

TIME AND AGAIN

RING AROUND THE SUN

STRANGERS IN THE UNIVERSE

THE WORLDS OF CLIFFORD SIMAK

ALL THE TRAPS OF EARTH AND OTHER STORIES

TIME IS THE SIMPLEST THING

THE SOLAR SYSTEM: OUR NEW FRONT YARD

WAY STATION (*Hugo Award, 1964*)

THEY WALKED LIKE MEN

ALL FLESH IS GRASS

FROM ATOMS TO INFINITY (*Editor*)

TRILOBITE, DINOSAUR AND MAN: THE EARTH'S STORY

WHY CALL THEM BACK FROM HEAVEN

THE WEREWOLF PRINCIPLE

THE GOBLIN RESERVATION

OUT OF THEIR MINDS

DESTINY DOLL

A Science Fiction Novel by

Clifford D. Simak

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Destiny Doll

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The place was white and there was something aloof and puritanical and uncaring about the whiteness, as if the city stood so lofty in its thoughts that the crawling scum of life was as nothing to it.

And yet, I told myself, the trees towered over all. It had been the trees, I knew, when the ship had started coming down toward the landing field, riding on the homing beam we'd caught far out in space, that had made me think we'd be landing at a village. Perhaps, I had told myself, a village not unlike that old white New England village I had seen on Earth, nestled in the valley with the laughing brook and the flame of autumn maples climbing up the hills. Watching, I had been thankful, and a bit surprised as well, to find such a place, a quiet and peaceful place, for surely any creatures that had constructed such a village would be a quiet and peaceful people, not given to the bizarre concepts and outlandish mores so often found on an alien planet.

But this was not a village. It was about as far from a village as it was possible to get. It had been the trees towering over the whiteness of it that had spelled village in my mind. But who would expect to find trees that would soar above a city, a city that rose so tall one must tilt his head to see its topmost towers?

The city rose into the air like a towering mountain range springing up, without benefit of foothills, from a level plain. It fenced in the landing field with its massive structure, like an oval of tall bleachers hemming in a playing field. From space the city had been shining white, but it no longer shone. It was white, all white, but soft and satiny, having something in common with the subdued gleam of expensive china on a candle-lighted table.

The city was white and the landing field was white and the sky so

faint a blue that it seemed white as well. All white except the trees that topped a city which surged up to mountain height.

My neck was getting tired from tilting my head to stare up at the city and the trees and now, when I lowered my head and looked across the field, I saw, for the first time, there were other ships upon the field. A great many other ships, I realized with a start—more ships than one would normally expect to find on even some of the larger and busier fields of the human galaxy. Ships of every size and shape and all of them were white. That had been the reason, I told myself, I'd not spotted them before. The whiteness of them served as a camouflage, blending them in with the whiteness of the field itself.

All white, I thought. The whole damn planet white. And not merely white, but a special kind of whiteness—all with that same soft-china glow. The city and the ships and the field itself all were china-white, as if they had been carved by some industrious sculptor out of one great block of stone to form a single piece of statuary.

There was no activity. There was nothing stirring. No one was coming out to meet us. The city stood up dead.

A gust of wind came from somewhere, a single isolated gust, twitching at my jacket. And I saw there was no dust. There was no dust for the wind to blow, no scraps of paper for it to roll about. I scuffed at the material which made up the landing surface and my scuffing made no marks. The material, whatever it might be, was as free of dust as if it had been swept and scrubbed less than an hour before.

Behind me I heard the scrape of boots on the ladder's rungs. It was Sara Foster coming down the ladder and she was having trouble with that silly ballistics rifle slung on a strap across one shoulder. It was swinging with the motion of her climbing and bumping on the ladder, threatening to get caught between the rungs.

I reached up and helped her down and she swung around as soon as she reached the ground to stare up at the city. Studying the classic planes of her face and mop of curling red hair, I wondered again how a woman of such beauty could have escaped all the softness of face that would have rounded out the beauty. She reached up a hand and brushed back a lock of hair that kept falling in her eyes. It had been falling in her eyes since the first moment I had met her.

"I feel like an ant," she said. "It just stands there, looking down at us. Don't you feel the eyes?"

I shook my head. I had felt no eyes.

"Any minute now," she said, "it will lift a foot and squash us."

"Where are the other two?" I asked.

"Tuck is getting the stuff together and George is listening, with that soft, silly look pasted on his face. He says that he is home."

"For the love of Christ," I said.

"You don't like George," said Sara.

"That's not it at all," I said. "I can ignore the man. It's this whole deal that gets me. It makes no sort of sense."

"But he got us here," she said.

"That is right," I said, "and I hope he likes it."

For I didn't like it. Something about the bigness and the whiteness and the quietness of it. Something about no one coming out to greet us or to question us. Something about the directional beam that had brought us in to this landing field, then no one being here. And about the trees as well. No trees had the right to grow as tall and big as those that rose above the city.

A clatter broke out above us. Friar Tuck had started down the ladder and George Smith, puffing with his bulk, was backing out the port, with Tuck guiding his waving feet to help him find the rungs.

"He'll slip and break his neck," I said, not caring too much if he did.

"He hangs on real good," said Sara, "and Tuck will help him down."

Fascinated, I watched them coming down the ladder, the friar guiding the blind man's feet and helping him to find the rungs when he happened to misjudge them.

A blind man, I told myself—a blind man and a footloose, phony friar, and a female big game hunter off on a wild-goose chase, hunting for a man who might have been no man at all, but just a silly legend. I must have been out of my mind, I told myself, to take on a job like this.

The two men finally reached the ground and Tuck, taking the blind man's arm, turned him around so he faced the city. Sara had been right, I saw, about that silly smile. Smith's face was wreathed in beatitude and a look like that, planted on his flabby, vacant face, reeked of obscenity.

Sara touched the blind man's arm with gentle fingers.

"You're sure this is the place, George? You couldn't be mistaken?"

The beatitude changed to an ecstasy that was frightening to see. "There is no mistake," he babbled, his squeaky voice thickened by emotion. "My friend is here. I hear him and he makes me see. It's almost as if I could reach out and touch him."

He made a fumbling motion with a pudgy hand, as if he were reaching

out to touch someone, but there was nothing there to touch. It all was in his mind.

It was insane on the face of it, insane to think that a blind man who heard voices—no, not voices, just a single voice—could lead us across thousands of light years, toward and above the galactic center, into territory through which no man and no human ship had been known to pass, to one specific planet. There had been, in past history, many people who had heard voices, but until now not too many people had paid attention to them.

"There is a city," Sara was saying to the blind man. "A great white city and trees taller than the city, trees that go up and up for miles. Is that what you see?"

"No," said George, befuddled by what he had been told. "No, that isn't what I see. There isn't any city and there aren't any trees." He gulped. "I see," he said, "I see . . ." He groped for what he saw and finally gave up. He waved his hands and his face was creased with the effort to tell us what he saw. "I can't tell you what I see," he finally whispered. "I can't find the words for it. There aren't any words."

"There is something coming," said Friar Tuck, pointing toward the city. "I can't make it out. Just a shimmer. As if there were something moving."

I looked where the friar was pointing and I caught the shimmer. But that was all it was. There was nothing one could really see. Out there, at the base of the city wall, something seemed to be moving, an elusive flow and sparkle.

Sara was looking through her glasses and now she slipped the strap over her shoulder and handed them to me.

"What do you think, captain?"

I put the glasses to my eyes and moved them slowly until I caught the movement. At first it was no more than a moving blur, but slowly it grew in size and separated. Horses? I wondered. It didn't make much sense that there'd be horses here, but that was what they looked like. White horses running toward us—if there were horses, of course they would be white! But very funny horses and, it seemed, with very funny feet, not running the way a normal horse would run, but with a crazy gait, rocking as they ran.

As they came closer I could make out further detail. They were horses, all right. Formalized horses—pert upright ears, flaring nostrils,

arched necks, manes that rose as if the wind were blowing through them, but manes that never moved. Like wild running horses some crummy artist would draw for a calendar, but keeping the set pose the artist had given them, never changing it. And their feet? Not feet, I saw. Not any feet at all, but rockers. Two pair of rockers, front and rear, with the front ones narrower so there'd be no interference as the horses ran–reaching forward with the rear pair and, as they touched the ground, rocking forward on them, with the front pair lifted and reaching out to touch the ground and rock in turn.

Shaken, I lowered the glasses and handed them to Sara.

"This," I said, "is one you won't believe."

She put the glasses up and I watched the horses coming on. There were eight of them and they all were white and one was so like the other there was no telling them apart.

Sara took down the glasses.

"Merry-go-round," she said.

"Merry-go-round?"

"Sure. Those mechanical contraptions they have at fairs and carnivals and amusement parks."

I shook my head, bewildered. "I never went to an amusement park," I told her. "Not that kind of amusement park. But when I was a kid I had a hobbyhorse."

The eight came rushing in, sliding to a halt. Once they halted, they stood rocking gently back and forth.

The foremost of them spoke to us, employing that universal space argot that man had found already in existence when he'd gone into space more than twenty centuries before, a language composed of terms and phrases and words from a hundred different tongues, forged into a bastard lingo by which many diverse creatures could converse with one another.

"We be hobbies," said the horse. "My name is Dobbin and we have come to take you in."

No part of him moved. He simply stood there, rocking gently, with his ears still perked, his carven nostrils flaring, with the nonexistent breeze blowing at his mane. I got the impression, somehow, that the words he spoke came out of his ears.

"I think they're cute," Sara cried, delighted. And that was typical; she would think that they were cute.

Dobbin paid her no attention. "We urge upon you haste," he said. "There is a mount for each of you and four to take the luggage. We have but a small amount of time."

I didn't like the way that it was going; I didn't like a thing about it. I'm afraid I snapped at him.

"We don't like being hurried," I told him. "If you have no time, we can spend the night on the ship and come in tomorrow morning."

"No! No!" the hobby protested frantically. "That is impossible. There exists great danger with the setting of the sun. You must be undercover by the time the sun is set."

"Why don't we do the way he says," suggested Tuck, pulling his robe tight around himself. "I don't like it out here. If there is no time now, we could come back and pick up the luggage later."

Said Dobbin, "We'll take the luggage now. There'll be no time in the morning."

"It seems to me," I said to Dobbin, "you're greatly pressed for time. If that's the case, why don't you simply turn around and go back where you came from. We can take care of ourselves."

"Captain Ross," said Sara Foster, firmly, "I'm not going to walk all that way if there's a chance to ride. I think you're being foolish."

"That may well be," I said, angrily, "but I don't like snotty robots ordering me around."

"We be hobbies," Dobbin said. "We not be any robots."

"You be human hobbies?"

"I do not know your meaning."

"Human beings made you. Creatures very much like us."

"I do not know," said Dobbin.

"The hell you don't," I said. I turned to Smith. "George," I said.

The blind man turned his puffy face toward me. The look of ecstasy still was pasted on it.

"What is it, captain?"

"In your talk back and forth with this friend of yours, did you ever mention hobbies?"

"Hobbies? Oh, you mean stamp collecting and . . ."

"No, I don't," I said. "I mean hobbyhorses. Did you ever mention hobbyhorses?"

"Until this moment," said the blind man, "I never heard of them."

"But you had toys when you were a child."

The blind man sighed. "Not the kind you are thinking of. I was born blind. I have never seen. The kind of toys other children had were not . . ."

"Captain," Sara said, angrily, "you are ridiculous. Why all this suspicion?"

"I'll tell you that," I said, just as angrily, "and it's an easy answer . . ."

"I know," she said. "I know. Suspicion, time and time again, has saved that neck of yours."

"Gracious lady," Dobbin said, "please believe there is great danger once the sun has set. I plead with you, I implore you, I urge you to come with us and most speedily at that."

"Tuck," said Sara, "get up that ladder and start getting down the stuff." She swung belligerently toward me. "Have you objections, captain?"

"Miss Foster," I told her, "it's your ship and it's your money. You're paying for the show."

"You're laughing at me," she stormed. "You've laughed all the way. You never really believed in anything I told you. You don't believe at all—not in anything."

"I got you here," I told her, grimly, "and I'll get you back. That's the deal we made. All I ask is that you try not to make the job any harder than it has to be."

And immediately that I said it, I was sorry that I had. We were on an alien planet and very far from home and we should stick together and not start off with bickering. More than likely, I admitted to myself, she had been quite right; I might have been ridiculous. But right away, I amended that. Ridiculous on the surface, maybe, but not in principle. When you hit an alien planet, you are on your own and you have to keep your senses and your hunches sharp. I'd been on a lot of alien planets and had always managed and so, of course, had Sara, but she'd always hit them with a good-sized expeditionary force and I'd been on my own.

Tuck, at the first word from her, had gone swarming up the ladder, with his robe tucked up underneath his belt so he wouldn't trip, and now was handing down the duffle bags and the other plunder to Sara, who was halfway up the ladder, taking the stuff from him and dropping it as gently as she could at the ladder's base. There was one thing you

had to say about the gal—she never shirked the work. She was always in there, doing her fair share and perhaps a good deal more.

"All right," I said to Dobbin," "run your packhorses over here. How do you handle this?"

"I regret," said Dobbin, "that we haven't any arms. But with the situation as it is, you'll be forced to do the packing. Just heap the luggage on top the hobbies' backs and when the load is completed, metal cinches will extrude from the belly and strap the load securely."

"Ingenious," I said.

Dobbin made a little forward dip upon his rockers, in the semblance of bowing. "Always," he said, "we attempt to serve."

Four of the horses came rocking up and I began loading them. When Tuck got through with handing down the gear, Sara came and helped me. Tuck closed the port and by the time he had climbed down the ladder, we were all set to go.

The sun was touching the city skyline and hunks were being nibbled out of it by the topmost towers. It was slightly more yellow than the sun of Earth—perhaps a K-type star. The ship would know, of course; the ship would have it all. The ship did all the work that a man was supposed to do. It gobbled up the data and pulled it all apart and put it back together. It knew about this planet and about the planet's star, it knew about the atmosphere and the chemistry and all the rest of it and it would have been more than willing to give it out to anyone who asked. But I hadn't asked. I had meant to go back and get the data sheet, but I hadn't counted on getting a reverse bum's rush by a pack of hobbyhorses. Although, I told myself, it probably made no difference. I could come back in the morning. But I couldn't bring myself to like the fact that I'd not latched onto that data sheet.

"Dobbin," I asked, "what is all this danger business? What are we supposed to be afraid of?"

"I cannot inform you," Dobbin said, "since I, myself, fail to understand, but I can assure you . . ."

"Oh, let it go," I told him.

Tuck was puffing and panting, trying to boost Smith onto one of the hobbies. Sara already was on one of them, sitting straight and prim, the perfect picture of a gal on the threshold of a very great adventure, and that, of course, was all it was to her—another great adventure. Sitting there, proud, astride her mount, with that ridiculous ancient rifle slung across her shoulder, nattily attired in an adventure-going costume.

I glanced quickly about the bowl that was the landing field, rimmed in by the city, and there was nothing stirring. Shadows ran out from the city's western wall as the sun went inching down behind the buildings and some of those western buildings had turned from white to black, but there were no lights.

Where was everyone? Where were the city's residents and all those visitors who'd come down on the spaceships standing like ghostly tombstones on the field? And why were the ships all white?

"Honored sir," Dobbin said to me, "if you please, would you get into my saddle. Our time is running short."

A chill was in the air and I don't mind admitting that I felt a twinge of fright. I don't know why. Perhaps just the place itself, perhaps the feeling of being trapped on the landing field rimmed in by the city, perhaps the fact that there seemed no living thing in sight except the hobbies—if you could call them living and I suppose you could.

I reached up and lifted the strap of my laser gun off my shoulder and, grasping it in hand, swung into Dobbin's saddle.

"You need no weapon here," Dobbin said, disapprovingly.

I didn't answer him. It was my own damn business.

Dobbin wheeled and we started out across the field, heading toward the city. It was a crazy kind of ride—smooth enough, no jerking, but going up and down as much, it seemed, as one was moving forward. It wasn't rocking; it was like skating on a sine wave.

The city seemed not to grow much larger, nor to gain in detail. We had been much farther from it, I realized, than it had appeared; the landing field was larger, too, than it had appeared.

Behind me, Tuck let out a yell.

"Captain!"

I twisted in the saddle.

"The ship!" yelled Tuck. "The ship! They're doing something to it."

And they were, indeed—whoever they might be.

A long-necked mechanism stood beside the ship. It looked like a bug with a squat and massive body and a long and slender neck with a tiny head atop it. From the mouth of it sprayed out a mist directed at the ship. Where it struck the ship, the ship was turning white, just like those other tombstone ships that stood upon the field.

I let out an angry yelp, reaching for a rein and yanking hard. But I might as well have yanked upon a rock. Dobbin kept straight on.

"Turn around," I yelled. "Go back!"

"There is no turning back, most honored sir," said Dobbin, conversationally, not even panting with his running. "There is no time. We must reach the safety of the city."

"There is time, by God," I yelled, jerking up the gun and aiming it at the ground in front of us, between Dobbin's ears.

"Shut your eyes," I yelled to the others, and pulled the trigger one notch back. Even through my eyelids, I sensed the flaring of the laser-light as it bounced back from the ground. Under me Dobbin reared and spun, almost swapping end for end, and when I opened my eyes we were heading back toward the ship.

"You'll be the death of us, crazy being," Dobbin moaned. "All of us will die."

I looked behind me and the hobbies all were following. Dobbin, it appeared, was leader and where he went they were content to follow. But farther back there was no sign of where the laser bolt had struck. Even at first notch capacity it should have made a mark; there should have been a smoking crater back there where it struck.

Sara was riding with one arm up across her eyes.

"You all right?" I asked.

"You crazy fool!" she cried.

"I yelled for you to close your eyes," I said. "There was bound to be reflection."

"You yelled, then fired," she said. "You didn't give us time."

She took her arm down and her eyes blinked at me and, hell, she was all right. Just something else to bitch about; she never missed a chance.

Ahead of us the bug that had been spraying the ship was scurrying off across the field. It must have had wheels or treads underneath it, for it was spinning along at a headlong clip, its long neck stretched out in front of it in its eagerness to get away from there.

"Please, sir," Dobbin pleaded, "we are simply wasting time. There is nothing can be done."

"One more word out of you," I said, "and this time right between the ears."

We reached the ship and Dobbin skidded to a halt, but I didn't wait for him to stop. I hit the ground and was running toward the ship while he still was moving. Although what I intended to do I had no idea.

I reached the ship and I could see that it was covered with some stuff that looked like frosty glass and when I say covered, I mean covered—every inch of it. There was no metal showing. It looked unfunctional,

like a model ship. Reduced in size, it could have passed for those little model ships sold in decorator shops to stick up on the mantle.

I put out my hand and touched it and it was slick and hard. There was no look of metal and there was no feel of metal, either. I rapped it with my gun stock and it rang like a bell, setting up a resonance that went bouncing across the field and came back as an echo from the city walls.

"What is it, captain?" Sara asked, her voice somewhat shaky. This was her ship, and there was no one who could mess around with it.

"A coating of something hard," I said. "As if it had been sealed."

"You mean we can't get into it?"

"I don't know. Maybe if we had a sledge hammer to crack it, we could peel it off."

She made a sudden motion and the rifle was off her back and the butt against her shoulder. I'll say this for her: crazy as that gun might be, she could handle it.

The sound of the shot was loud and flat and the hobbies reared in terror. But above the sound of the report itself was another sound, a wicked howling that almost screamed, the noise of a ricocheting bullet tumbling end for end, and pitched lower than the shrill howling of the slug was the booming resonance of the milk-white ship. But there was no indication of where the bullet might have struck. The whiteness of the ship still was smooth—uncracked, unblemished, unmarked. Two thousand foot-pounds of metal had slammed against it and had not made a dent.

I lifted the laser gun and Dobbin said to me, "There be no use, you foolish folk. There is nothing you can do."

I whirled on him angrily. "I thought I told you," I yelled. "One more word out of you and right between the eyes."

"Violence," Dobbin told me, perkily, "will get you nowhere. But staying here, once the sun has set, spells very rapid death."

"But the ship!" I shouted.

"The ship is sealed," said Dobbin, "like all the others. Better sealed with you outside of it than with you still inside."

And although I would not have admitted it, I knew that he was right in saying there was nothing we could do. For I recalled that the field had been unmarked by the laser beam and undoubtedly all this whiteness was the same—the field, the ships, the city, all coated, more than likely, with some substance so tightly bonded in its atomic structure that it was indestructible.

"I sorrow greatly for you," said Dobbin, with no sorrow in his voice. "I know the shock of you. But once on this planet, no one ever leaves. Although there is no need of also dying. I plead with you compassionately to get into the saddle and let us head for safety."

I looked up at Sara and she nodded quietly. She had figured it, I knew, about the way I had, although in my case most unwillingly. There was no use in staying out here. The ship was sealed, whatever that might mean or for whatever purpose, and when morning came we could come back to see what we could do. From the moment we had met him, Dobbin had been insistent about the danger. There might be danger or there might be none—there was no way, certainly, that we could determine if there were or weren't. The only sensible thing, at the moment, was to go along with him.

So I swung swiftly to the saddle and even before I found the seat, Dobbin had whirled about, running even as he whirled.

"We have lost most valued time," he told me. "We will try with valiance to make it up. We yet may reach the city."

A good part of the landing field lay in shadow now and only the sky was bright. A faint, smokelike dusk was filtering through the city.

Once on this planet, Dobbin had said, no one ever leaves. But these were his words alone, and nothing else. Perhaps there was a real intent to keep us here, which would explain the sealing of the ship, but there would be ways, I told myself, that could be tried to get off the planet when the time to go should come. There were always ways.

The city was looming up as we drew closer, and now the buildings began to assume their separate shapes. Up till now they had been a simple mass that had the appearance of a solid cliff thrusting up from the flatness of the field. They had seemed tall from out in the center of the field; now they reared into the sky so far that, this close, it was impossible to follow with the eye up to their tops.

The city still stayed dead. There were no lights in any of the windows—if, indeed, the buildings did have windows. There was no sign of movement at the city's base. There were no outlying buildings; the field ran up to the base of the buildings and the buildings then jutted straight into the sky.

The hobbies thundered cityward, their rockers pounding out a ringing clangor as they humped along like a herd of horses galloping wildly before a scudding storm front. Once you got the hang of riding them, it

wasn't bad at all. You just went sort of loose and let your body follow that undulating sine wave.

The city walls loomed directly in front of us, great slabs of masonry that went up and up, and now I saw that there were streets, or at least what I took for streets, narrow slits of empty blackness that looked like fractures in a monstrous cliff.

The hobbies plunged into one of the slits of emptiness and darkness closed upon us. There was no light here; except when the sun stood straight overhead, there never would be light. The walls seemed to rise all about us, the slit that was a street narrowing down to a vanishing point so that the walls seemed on every hand.

Ahead of us one building stood a little farther back, widening the street, and from the level of the street a wide ramp ran up to massive doors. The hobbies turned and flung themselves at the ramp and went humping up it and through one of the gaping doors.

We burst into a room where there was a little light and the light, I saw, came from great rectangular blocks set into the wall that faced us.

The hobbies rocked swiftly toward one of the blocks and came to a halt before it. To one side I saw a gnome, or what appeared to be a gnome, a small, humpbacked, faintly humanoid creature that spun a dial set into the wall beside the slab of glowing stone.

"Captain, look!" cried Sara.

There was no need for her to cry out to me—I had seen it almost as soon as she had. Upon the glowing stone appeared a scene—a faint and shadowed scene, as if it might be a place at the bottom of a clear and crystal sea, its colors subdued by the depth of water, its outlines shifting with the little wind ripples that ran on the water's surface.

A raw and bleeding landscape, with red lands stretching to a mauve, storm-torn horizon, broken by crimson buttes, and in the foreground a clump of savage yellow flowers. But even as I tried to grasp all this, to relate it to the kind of world it might have been, it changed, and in its place was a jungle world, drowned in the green and purple of overwhelming vegetation, spotted by the flecks of screaming color that I knew were tropic flowers, and back of it all a sense of lurking bestiality that made my hide crawl even as I looked at it. Then it, too, was gone—a glimpse and it was gone—and in its place was a yellow desert lighted by a moon and by a flare of stars that turned the sky to silver, with the lips of the marching sand dunes catching and fracturing

the moon- and starlight so that the dunes appeared to be foaming waves of water charging in upon the land.

The desert did not fade as the other places had. It came in a rush upon us and exploded in my face.

Beneath me I felt the violent plunging of a bucking Dobbin and made a frantic grab at the cantle of the saddle which seemed to have no cantle and then felt myself pitched forward and turning in the air.

I struck on one shoulder and skidded in the sand and finally came to rest, the breath knocked out of me. I struggled up, cursing—or trying to curse and failing, because I had no breath to curse with—and once on my feet, saw that we were alone in that land we had seen upon the glowing block.

Sara sprawled to one side of me and not far off Tuck was struggling to his feet, hampered by the cassock that had become entangled about his legs, and a little beyond Tuck, George was crawling on his hands and knees, whimpering like a pup that had been booted out of doors into a friendless, frigid night.

All about us lay the desert, dessicated, without a shred of vegetation, flooded by the great white moon and the thousand glowing stars, all shining like lamps in a cloudless sky.

"He's gone!" George was whimpering as he crawled about. "I can't hear him anymore. I have lost my friend."

And that was not all that was lost. The city was lost and the planet on which the city stood. We were in another place.

This was one trip, I told myself, that I never should have made. I had known it all along. I'd not believed in it, even from the start. And to make a go of it, you had to believe in everything you did. You had to have a reason for everything you did.

Although, I recalled, I had really no choice.

I had been committed from the moment I had seen that beauty of a spaceship standing on the field of Earth.

2

I had come sneaking back to Earth. Not back really, for I never had been there to start with. But Earth was where my money was and Earth was sanctuary and out in space I was fair game to anyone who found me. Not that what I had done had been actually so bad, nor was I to blame entirely, but there were a lot of people who had lost their shirts on it and they were out to get me and eventually would get me if I failed to reach Earth's sanctuary.

The ship that I was driving was a poor excuse—a fugitive from a junkyard (and that was exactly what it was), patched up and stuck together with binder twine and bailing wire, but I didn't need it long. All I wanted of it was to get me to Earth. Once I stepped out of it, it could fall into a heap for all it mattered to me. Once I got to Earth, I'd be staying there.

I knew that Earth Patrol would be on watch for me—not that Earth cared; so far as Earth was concerned, the more the merrier. Rather a patrol to keep undesirable characters like myself from fleeing back to Earth.

So I came into the solar system with the Sun between myself and Earth and I hoped that my slide rule hadn't slipped a notch and that I had it figured right. I piled on all the normal-space speed I could nurse out of the heap and the Sun's gravity helped considerably and when I passed the Sun that ship was traveling like a hell-singed bat. There was an anxious hour when it seemed I might have sliced it just a bit too close. But the radiation screens held and I lost only half my speed and there was Earth ahead:

With all engines turned off and every circuit cut, I coasted on past

Venus, no more than five million miles off to my left, and headed in for Earth.

The patrol didn't spot me and it was sheer luck, of course, but there wasn't much to spot. I had no energy output and all the electronics were doused and all they could have picked up was a mass of metal and fairly small, at that. And I came in, too, with the Sun behind me, and the solar radiations, no matter how good the equipment you may have, help louse up reception.

It was insane to try it, of course, and there were a dozen very nasty ways in which I could have failed, but on many a planet-hunting venture I had taken chances that were no less insane. The thing was that I made it.

There is just one spaceport on Earth. They don't need any more. The traffic isn't heavy. There are few people left on Earth; they all are out in space. The ones who are left are the hopeless sentimentalists who think there is status attached to living on the planet where the human race arose. They, and the ones like myself, are the only residents. The sentimentalists, I had heard, were a fairly snooty crowd of self-styled aristocrats, but that didn't bother me. I wasn't planning on having too much to do with them. Occasionally excursion ships dropped in with a load of pilgrims, back to visit the cradle of the race, and a few freighters bringing in assorted cargo, but that was all there was.

I brought in the ship and set it down and walked away from it, carrying my two bags, the only possessions I had been able to get away with before the vultures had come flocking in. The ship didn't fall into a heap; it just stood there, its slab-sided self, the sorriest-looking vessel you ever clapped your eyes on.

Just two berths away from it stood this beauty of a ship. It gleamed with smart efficiency, slim and sleek, a space yacht that seemed straining toward the sky, impatient at its leash. There was no way of knowing, of course, just by looking at it, what it had inside, but there is something about a ship that one simply cannot miss. Just looking at this one, there was no doubt that no money had been spared to make it the best that could be built. Standing there and looking at it, I found my hands itching to get hold of it.

I suppose they itched the worse because I knew I'd never go into space again. I was all washed up. I'd spend the rest of my life on Earth the best way that I could. If I ever left it, I'd be gobbled up.

I walked off the field and went through customs—if you could call it

customs. They just went through the motions. They had nothing against me or anyone; they weren't sore at me, or anyone. That, it seemed to me, was the nicest thing one could say of Earth.

I went to an inn nearby and once I'd settled in, went down to the bar.

I was on my third or fourth when a robot flunky came into the bar and zeroed in on me.

"You are Captain Ross?"

I wondered, with a flare of panic, just what trouble I was in for. There wasn't a soul on Earth who knew me or knew that I was coming. The only contacts I had made had been with the customs people and the room clerk at the inn.

"I have a note for you," said the robot, handing it to me.

The envelope was sealed and it had no marks upon it.

I opened it and took out the card. It read:

Captain Michael Ross,
Hilton Inn

> If Captain Ross will be my dinner guest tonight, I would be much obliged. My car will be waiting at the entrance of the inn at eight o'clock. And, captain, may I be among the first to welcome you to Earth.
>
> Sara Foster

I sat there staring at it and the bottle robot came sliding down the bar. He picked up the empty glass. "Another one?" he asked.

"Another one," I said.

Just who was Sara Foster, and how had she known, an hour after my arrival, that I was on Earth?

I could ask around, of course, but there seemed no one to ask, and for some reason I could not figure out why I felt disinclined to do so.

It could be a trap. There were people, I well knew, who hated me enough to have a try at smuggling me off the Earth. They would know by now, of course, that I had obtained a ship, but few who would believe that such a ship would carry me to Earth. And there could be none of them who could even guess I'd already reached the Earth.

I sat there, drinking, trying to get it straight in mind, and I finally decided I would take a chance.

Sara Foster lived in a huge house set atop a hill, surrounded by acres of wilderness that in turn surrounded more acres of landscaped lawns

and walks, and in the center of all of this sat the huge house, built of sun-warmed bricks, with a wide portico that ran the length of the house, and with many chimneys thrusting from its roof.

I had expected to be met at the door by a robot, but Sara Foster was there, herself, to greet me. She was wearing a green dinner dress that swept the floor and served to set off, in violent contrast, the flame of her tumbled hair, with the one errant lock forever hanging in her eyes.

"Captain Ross," she said, giving me her hand, "how nice of you to come. And on such short notice, too. I'm afraid it was impetuous of me, but I did so want to see you."

The hall in which we stood was high and cool, paneled with white-painted wood and the floor of wood so polished that it shone, with a massive chandelier of crystal hanging from the ceiling. The place breathed wealth and a certain sort of Earth-rooted gentility and it all was very pleasant.

"The others are in the library," she said. "Let us go and join them."

She linked her arm through mine and led me down the hall until we came to a door that led into a room that was a far cry from the hall which I had entered. It might have been a library—there were some shelves with books—but it looked more like a trophy room. Mounted heads hung from every wall, a glass-enclosed gun rack ran across one end, and the floor was covered with fur rugs, some with the heads attached, the bared fangs forever snarling.

Two men were sitting in chairs next to the mammoth fireplace and as we entered one of them got up. He was tall and cadaverous, his face long and lean and dark, not so much darkened, I thought as I looked at him, by the outdoors and the sun as by the thoughts within his skull. He wore a dark brown cassock loosely belted at the waist by a string of beads, and his feet, I saw, were encased in sturdy sandals.

"Captain Ross," said Sara Foster, "may I present Friar Tuck."

He held out a bony hand. "My legal name," he said, "is Hubert Jackson, but I prefer Friar Tuck. In the course of my wanderings, captain, I have heard many things of you."

I looked hard at him. "You have done much wandering?"

For I had seen his like before and had liked none of what I saw.

He bent his bony head. "Far enough," he said, "and always in the search of truth."

"Truth," I said, "at times is very hard to come by."

"And captain," Sara said, quickly, "this is George Smith."

The second man by this time had fumbled to his feet and was holding out a flabby hand in my direction. He was a tubby little man with a grubby look about him and his eyes were a milky white.

"As you can see by now," said Smith, "I am quite blind. You'll excuse me for not rising when you first came in the room."

It was embarrassing. There was no occasion for the man to so thrust his blindness on us.

I shook his hand and it was as flabby as it looked, as nearly limp as a living hand can be. Immediately he fumbled his way back into the chair again.

"Perhaps this chair," Sara said to me. "There'll be drinks immediately. I know what the others want, but . . ."

"If you have some Scotch," I said.

I sat down in the chair she had indicated and she took another and there were the four of us, huddled in a group before that looming fireplace and surrounded by the heads of creatures from a dozen different planets.

She saw me looking at them. "I forgot," she said. "You'll excuse me, please. You had never heard of me–until you got my note, I mean."

"I am sorry, madam."

"I'm a ballistics hunter," she said, with more pride, it seemed to me, than such a statement called for.

She could not have missed the fact that I did not understand. "I use only a ballistics rifle," she explained. "One that fires a bullet propelled by an explosive charge. It is," she said, "the only sporting way to hunt. It requires a considerable amount of skill in weapon handling and occasionally some nerve. If you miss a vital spot the thing that you are hunting has a chance at you."

"I see," I said. "A sporting proposition. Except that you have the first crack at it."

"That is not always true," she said.

A robot brought the drinks and we settled down as comfortably as we could, fortified behind our glasses.

"I have a feeling, captain," Sara said, "that you do not approve."

"I have no opinion at all," I told her. "I have no information on which opinion could be based."

"But you have killed wild creatures."

"A few," I said, "but there was no such thing involved as sporting instinct. For food, occasionally. At times to save my life."

I took a good long drink. "I took no chance," I told her. "I used a laser gun. I just kept burning them as long as it seemed necessary."

"Then you're no sportsman, captain."

"No," I said, "I am–let us say I was–a planet hunter. It seems I'm now retired."

And I wondered, sitting there, what it was all about. She hadn't invited me, I was sure, just for my company. I didn't fit in this room, nor in this house, any better than the other two who sat there with me. Whatever was going on, they were a part of it and the idea of being lumped with them in any enterprise left me absolutely cold.

She must have read my mind. "I imagine you are wondering, captain, what is going on."

"Ma'm," I said, "the thought had crossed my mind."

"Have you ever heard of Lawrence Arlen Knight?"

"The Wanderer," I said. "Yes, I've heard of him. Stories told about him. That was long ago. Well before my time."

"Those stories?"

"The usual sort of stories. Space yarns. There were and are a lot of others like him. He just happened to snare the imagination of the story tellers. That name of his, perhaps. It has a ring to it. Like Johnny Appleseed or Sir Launcelot."

"But you heard . . ."

"That he was hunting something? Sure. They all are hunting something."

"But he disappeared."

"Stay out there long enough," I told her, "and keep on poking into strange areas and you're bound to disappear. Sooner or later you'll run into something that will finish you."

"But you . . ."

"I quit soon enough," I said. "But I was fairly safe, at that. All I was hunting were new planets. No Seven Cities of Cibola, no mystic El Dorado, no trance-bound Crusade of the Soul."

"You mock at us," said Friar Tuck. "I do not like a mocker."

"I did not mean to mock," I said to Sara Foster. "Space is full of tales. The one you mention is only one of many. They provide good entertainment when there's nothing else to do. And I might add that I

dislike correction at the hands of a phony religico with dirty fingernails."

I put my glass down upon the table that stood beside the chair and got up on my feet.

"Thanks for the drink," I said. "Perhaps some other time . . ."

"Just a moment, please," she said. "If you will please sit down. I apologize for Tuck. But it's I you're dealing with, not him. I have a proposal that you may find attractive."

"I've retired," I said.

"Perhaps you saw the ship standing on the field. Two berths from where you landed."

"Yes, I saw the ship. And admired it. Does it belong to you?"

She nodded. "Captain, I need someone to run that ship. How would you like the job?"

"But why me," I asked. "Surely there are other men."

She shook her head. "On Earth? How many qualified spacemen do you think there are on Earth?"

"I suppose not many."

"There are none," she said. "Or almost none. None I'd trust that ship to."

I sat down again. "Let's get this straight," I said. "How do you know you can trust the ship to me? What do you know about me? How did you know I had arrived on Earth?"

She looked straight at me, squinting just a little, perhaps the way she'd squint down a rifle barrel at a charging beast.

"I can trust you," she said, "because there's nowhere you can go. You're fair game out in space. Your only safety would lie in sticking with the ship."

"Fair enough," I admitted. "And how about going out in space? The Patrol . . ."

"Captain, believe me, there's nothing that can overtake that ship. And if someone should set out to do it, we can wear them down. We have a long, hard way to go. It would not be worth their while. And, furthermore, I think it can be arranged so that no one ever knows you've gone into space."

"That's all very interesting," I said. "Could you bring yourself to tell me where we might be going?"

She said, "We don't know where we're going."

And that was damn foolishness, of course. You don't set out on a flight until you know where you are going. If she didn't want to tell, why couldn't she just say so?

"Mr. Smith," said Sara, "knows where we are going."

I switched my head to look at him, that great lump huddled in his chair, the sightless, milk-white eyes in his flabby face.

"I have a voice in my head," he said. "I have contact with someone. I have a friend out there."

Oh, wonderful! I thought. It all comes down to this. He has a voice in his head.

"Let me guess," I said to Sara Foster. "This religious gentleman brought Mr. Smith to you."

She suddenly was angry. Her face turned white and her blue eyes seemed to narrow to gleaming jets of ice.

"You are right," she said, biting off the words, "but that's not all of it. You know, of course, that Knight was accompanied by a robot."

I nodded. "A robot by the name of Roscoe."

"And that Roscoe was a telepathic robot?"

"There's no such thing," I said.

"But there is. Or was. I've done my homework, captain. I have the specifications for this particular robot. And I had them long before Mr. Smith showed up. Also letters that Knight had written to certain friends of his. I have, perhaps, the only authentic documentation concerning Knight and what he was looking for. All of it acquired before these two gentlemen showed up and obtained from sources of which they could have had no knowledge."

"But they could have heard . . ."

"I didn't tell a soul," she said. "It was—what would you call it? Perhaps no more than a hobby. Maybe an obsession. Bits and pieces picked up here and there, with never any hope of fitting them together. It was such a fascinating legend . . ."

"And that is all it is," I said. "A legend. Built up through the years by accomplished, but nonmalicious, liars. One tiny fact is taken and twisted and interwoven with other tiny facts until all these interwoven tiny facts, forced into fictitious relationships with one another, become so complicated that there is not a shred of hope of knowing which is solid fact and which is inspired fiction."

"But letters? And specifications for a special kind of robot?"

"That would be something else again. If they were authentic."

"There is no question about their authenticity. I've made sure of that."

"And what do these letters say?"

"That he was looking for something."

"I've told you they all were looking for something. Every one of them. Some of them believed the things they were looking for are there. Some of them simply hypnotized themselves into believing it. That's the way it was in the old days, that's the way it is right now. These kind of people need some excuse for their eternal wandering. They need to graft some purpose to a purposeless existence. They're in love with space and all those new unknown worlds which lie out beyond the next horizon. There is no reason in the world why they should be batting around out there and they know this, so they concoct their reasons and. . . ."

"Captain, you don't believe a word of it?"

"Not a word," I said.

It was all right with me if she let these two adventurers lead her on a wild-goose chase, but I was not about to be a party to it. Although, remembering that ship standing out there on the landing field, I admit that I was tempted. But it was impossible, I knew. Earth was sanctuary and I needed sanctuary.

"You do not like me," Friar Tuck said to me. "And I don't like you, either. But let me tell you, honestly, that I brought my blind companion to Miss Foster with no thought of monetary gain. I am past all need of monetary gain. All I seek is truth."

I didn't answer him. Of what use would be an answer? I'd known his breed before.

"I cannot see," said Smith, speaking not to us, not even to himself, but to some unknown person that no one knew about. "I have never seen. I know no shape except the shapes that my hands can tell me. I can envision objects in my imagination, but the vision must be wrong, for I do not know of colors, although I am told there is such a thing as color. Red means something to you, but it is meaningless to me. There is no way one can describe a color to a man who cannot see. The feel of texture, yes, but no way in the world to really know of texture. Water to drink, but what does water look like? Whiskey in a glass with ice, but what does whiskey look like? Ice is hard and smooth and has a feel I'm told is cold. It is water that has turned to crystals and I understand it's white, but what is crystal, what is white?

"I have nothing of this world except the space it gives me and the

thoughts of other people, but how am I to know that my interpretations of these thoughts are right? Or that I can marshall facts correctly? I have little of this world, but I have another world." He lifted his hand and with his fingers tapped his skull. "Another world," he said, "here inside my head. Not an imagined world, but another world that's given me by another being. I do not know where this other being is, although I've been made to know he is very distant from us. That is all I know for certain—the great distance that he lies and the direction of that distance."

"So that is it," I said, looking at Sara. "He's to be the compass. We set out in the direction that he tells us and we keep on going . . ."

"That is it," she said. "That was the way it was with Roscoe."

"Knight's robot?"

"Knight's robot. That's what the letters say. Knight had it himself—just a little of it. Just enough to know there was someone out there. So he had the robot fabricated."

"A made-to-order robot? A telepathic robot?"

She nodded.

It was hard to swallow. It was impossible. There was something going on here beyond all belief.

"There is truth out there," said Tuck. "A truth we cannot even guess. I'm willing to bet my life to go out and see."

"And that," I said, "is exactly what you would be doing. Even if you found the truth . . ."

"If it's out there," Sara said, "someone, some time, will find it. Why can't it be us?"

I looked around the room. The heads glared down at us, fantastic and ferocious creatures from many distant planets, and some of them I'd seen before and others I had only heard about and there were a number of them that I'd never heard about, not even in the alcoholic tales told by lonely, space-worn men when they gathered with their fellows in obscure bars on planets of which perhaps not more than a thousand people knew the names.

The walls are full, I thought. There is no more room for other heads. And the glamor of hunting and of bringing home more heads may be fading, too. Perhaps not alone for Sara Foster, big game huntress, but for those other people in whose eyes her adventures on distant planets spelled out a certain kind of status. So what more logical than to hunt

another kind of game, to bring home another kind of head, to embark upon a new and more marvelous adventure?

"No one," said Sara Foster, "would ever know you'd gone into space, that you had left the Earth. You'd come here someday and a man would leave again. He'd look exactly like you, but he would not be you. He'd live here on Earth in your stead and you'd go into space."

"You have money enough to buy a deal like this?" I asked. "To buy the loyalty of such a man?"

She shrugged. "I have money enough to buy anything at all. And once we were well out in space what difference would it make if he were unmasked?"

"None at all," I said, "except I'd like to come back with the ship—if the ship comes back."

"That could be arranged," she said. "That could be taken care of."

"The man who would be me here on Earth," I asked, "might meet with a fatal accident?"

"Not that," she said. "We could never get away with that. There are too many ways to identify a man."

I got the impression she was just a little sorry so simple a solution was not possible.

I shied away from it, from the entire deal. I didn't like the people and I didn't like the project. But there was the itch to get my hands upon that ship and be out in space again. A man could die on Earth, I thought; he could suffocate. I'd seen but little of the Earth and the little I had seen I'd liked. But it was the kind of thing a man might like for a little time and then slowly grow to hate. Space was in my blood. I got restless when I was out of it too long. There was something out there that got beneath one's skin, became a part of one. The star-strewn loneliness, the silence, the sense of being anchored nowhere, of being free to go wherever one might wish and to leave whenever one might wish—this was all a part of it, but not all of it. There was something else that no man had ever found a way to put a name to. Perhaps a sense of truth, corny as it sounded.

"Think of a price," said Sara Foster, "then double it. There'll be no quibbling."

"But why?" I asked. "Does money have no meaning for you?"

"Of course it has," she said, "but having it also has taught me that you must pay for what you get. And we need you, Captain Ross. You've

never traveled the safe spaceways, all marked out and posted. You've been out there ahead of all the others, hunting for your planets. We can use a man like you."

A robot stepped through the doorway. "Dinner is ready to be served, Miss Foster."

She looked at me, challenging me.

"I'll think on it," I promised.

3

And I should have thought on it much longer, I told myself as I stood on that moon-washed desert; I never should have gone.

Smith still was crawling around on his hands and knees and whimpering. His blind-white eyes, catching the moonlight, glinted like the eyes of a hunting cat. Tuck was getting his legs unwound from the ridiculous robe he wore, stumbling toward the moaning Smith. What was it, I wondered, that made the two of them such pals? Not homosexuality, for that would have been apparent in the close confines of the space trip out from Earth; there must be within them some sort of spiritual need that reached out and touched the other. Certainly Smith would be glad of someone to look after him and Tuck might well regard the blind man and his voice in the head as a good sort of investment, but their friendship must be something more than that. Two fumbling incompetents, perhaps, who had found in each other's weaknesses a common bond of compassion and of understanding.

The desert was almost as bright as day and, looking at the sky, I saw it was not the moon alone that accounted for the brightness. The entire vault of sky was ablaze with stars, more stars and bigger stars and brighter than I had ever seen before. The stars had not been apparent in the quick glance we had gotten of this place before the hobbies bucked

us into it, but now they were–stars that seemed so close it seemed a man could reach up his hand and pick them, like the apples off a tree.

Sara was on her feet by now, still grasping her rifle, carrying it at port arms across her body.

"I managed to keep the muzzle up," she told me.

"Well, hurrah for you," I said.

"That's the first rule, always," she told me. "Keep the muzzle up so it doesn't clog. If I hadn't, the barrel would be full of sand."

George still was wailing and now his wailing took the form of words. "What happened, Tuck?" he screamed. "Where are we? What happened to my friend? He has gone away. I don't hear him anymore."

"For the love of Christ," I said to Tuck, disgusted, "get him on his feet and dust him off and wipe his nose and tell him what has happened."

"I can't explain," growled Tuck, "until someone tells me what is going on."

"I can tell you that," I said. "We got took. We've been had, my friend."

"They'll come back," howled George. "They'll come back for us. They won't leave us here."

"No, of course they won't," said Tuck, hauling him to his feet. "They'll come back when the sun is up."

"The sun ain't up now, Tuck?"

"No," said Tuck. "The moon. And a lot of stars."

And I was stuck with this, I thought. Heaved into a place where I had no idea where I was and loaded down with a couple of nincompoops and a white Diana who could only think about how she had kept the muzzle up.

I took a look around. We had been dumped on the lower slope of a dune and on either side of us the dunes heaved up to meet the night-time sky. The sky itself was empty of everything but the moon and stars. There was not a cloud in sight. And the land was empty of anything but sand. There were no trees or bushes, not a blade of vegetation. There was a slight chill in the air, but that, I figured, would be dissipated as soon as the sun came up. More than likely we had a long, hot day ahead and we hadn't any water.

Long furrows in the sand showed where our bodies had plowed through it, pushing up little mounds of sand ahead of us. We had been thrown from the direction of the other dune, and knowing exactly from

where we had been thrown, it occurred to me, might have some importance. I walked out a ways and with the butt of my gun drew a long line in the sand and made some rough arrows pointing from it.

Sara watched me closely. "You think we can get back?" she asked.

"I wouldn't bet on it," I told her, shortly.

"There was a doorway of some sort," she said, "and the hobbies bucked us through it and when we landed here there wasn't any doorway."

"They had us pegged," I said, "from the minute we set down. They gave us the business from the very start. We never had a prayer."

"But we are here," she said, "and we have to start to thinking how we can get out."

"If you can keep an eye on those two clowns," I said, "and see they cause no trouble, I'll go out for a look."

She regarded me gravely. "Have you anything in mind, captain? Anything in particular?"

I shook my head. "Just a look around. There could be a chance I might stumble on some water. We'll need water badly before the day is over."

"But if you lost your way . . ."

"I'll have my tracks to follow," I told her, "if a wind doesn't come up suddenly and wipe them out. If anything goes wrong, I'll fire a beam up into the sky and you loose off a shot or two to guide me back."

"You don't think the hobbies will come back to get us?"

"Do you think so?"

"I suppose not," she said. "But what's the point of it? What did they gain by it? Our luggage couldn't be worth that much to them."

"They got rid of us," I said.

"But they guided us in. If it hadn't been for that beam . . ."

"There was the ship," I said. "It could have been the ship that they were after. They had a lot of ships out on the field. They must have lured in a lot of other people."

"And all of them on this planet? Or on other planets?"

"Could be," I said. "Our job right now is to see if there's any place better than this desert we can go. We haven't any food and we have no water."

I settled the strap of my rifle on my shoulder and started to plod up the dune.

"Anything else I can do?" asked Sara.

"You might keep those two from tracking up that line I made. If a wind comes up and starts to blot it out, try to mark it somehow."

"You have a lot of faith in that line."

"Just that it's a good idea to know where we are."

"It mightn't mean a thing," she said. "We must have been thrown through some sort of space-time null-point and where we wound up wouldn't mean . . ."

"I agree," I said, "but it's all we have to go on."

I plodded up the dune and it was heavy going. My feet sank deep into the sand and I kept sliding back. I could make no time. And it was hard work. Just short of its crest I stopped to rest a moment and looked back down the slope. The three of them stood there, looking up at me. And for some reason I couldn't explain, I found myself loving them—all three of them, that creepy, soft fool of a Smith and that phony Tuck, and Sara, bless her, with her falling lock of hair and that ridiculous oldtime rifle. No matter what they were, they were human beings and somehow or other I'd have to get them out of here. For they were counting on me. To them I was the guy who had barnstormed space and rode out all sorts of trouble. I was the rough, tough character who technically headed up the expedition. I was the captain and when the chips were down it was the captain who was expected to come through. The poor, damn, trusting fools, I thought—I didn't have the least idea of what was going on and I had no plans and was as puzzled and beaten and hopeless as any one of them. But I couldn't let them know it. I had to keep on acting as if at any moment I'd come up with a trick that would get us all home free.

I lifted a hand and waved to them and I tried to keep it jaunty, but I failed. Then I clambered up the dune and over the top of it and the desert stretched before me. In every direction that I looked, it was all the same—waves of dunes as far as I could see, each dune like the other and no break at all—no trees that might hint water, absolutely nothing but a sweep of sand.

I went plunging down the dune and climbed another and from its crest the desert looked the same as ever. I could go on, I admitted to myself, climbing dunes forever and there might never be a difference. The whole damn planet might be desert, without a single break. The hobbies, when they'd bucked us through the gate or door or whatever it might be, had

known what they were doing, and if they wanted to get rid of us, they could not have done a more efficient job of it. For they, or the world of which they were a part, hadn't missed a lick. We had been tolled in by the beam and hustled off the ship and the ship been sealed and then, without the time to think, with no chance to protest, we had been heaved into this world. A bum's rush, I thought, all worked out beforehand.

I climbed another dune. There always was the chance, I kept on telling myself, that in one of those little valleys which lay between the dunes there might be something worth the finding. Water, perhaps, for water would be the thing that we would need the most. Or a path that might lead us to better country or to natives who might be able to give us some sort of help, although why anyone would want to live in a place like this was more than I could figure.

Actually, of course, I expected nothing. There was nothing in this sweep of desert upon which a man could build much hope. But when I neared the top of the dune—near enough so that I could see over the top of it—I spotted something on the crest of the dune beyond.

A birdcage sort of contraption was half buried in the crest, with its metallic ribs shimmering in the moon- and starlight, like the ribcage of some great prehistoric beast that had been trapped atop the dune, bawling out its fright until death had finally quieted it.

I slipped the rifle off my shoulder and held it ready. The sliding sand carried me slowly down the dune, whispering as it slid. When I had slid so far that I could no longer see over the crest of the dune, I set off at an angle to the left and began to climb again, crouching to keep my head down. Twenty feet from the top I got down and crawled, flat against the sand. When my eyes came over the crest and I could see the birdcage once again, I froze, digging in my toes to keep from sliding back.

Below the cage, I saw, was a scar of disturbed sand and even as I watched, new blobs of sand broke loose beneath the cage and went trickling down the slope. It had not been long ago, I was sure, that the cage had impacted on the dune crest—the sand disturbed by its landing had not as yet reached a state of equilibrium and the scar was fresh.

Impacted seemed a strange word, and yet reason told me that it must have impacted, for it was most unlikely that anyone had placed it there. A ship of some sort, perhaps, although a strange sort of ship, not enclosed, but fashioned only of a frame. And if, as I thought, it were

indeed a ship, it must have carried life and the life it carried was either dead within it or somewhere nearby.

I glanced slowly up and down the length of the dune and there, far to the right of where the birdcage lay, was a faint furrow, a sort of toboggan slide, plunging from the crest downward into the shadow that lay between the dunes. I strained to penetrate the shadows, but could make out nothing. I'd have to get closer to that toboggan slide.

I backed off down the dune and went spidering across it, angling to the right this time. I moved as cautiously as I could to keep down the sound of the sliding sand that broke free and went hissing down the dune face as I moved. There might be something over on the other side of that dune, listening for any sign of life.

When I thrust the upper part of my head over the dune crest, I still was short of the toboggan slide, but much closer to it and from the hollow between the dunes came a sliding, scraping sound. Straining my eyes, it seemed to me that I caught some motion in the trough, but could not be sure. The sound of sliding and of scraping stopped and then began again and once more there was a hint of movement. I slid my rifle forward so that in an instant I could aim it down into the trough.

I waited.

The slithering sound stopped, then started once again and something moved down there (I was sure of it this time) and something moaned. All sound came to an end.

There was no use of waiting any longer.

"Hello down there!" I called.

There was no answer.

"Hello," I called again.

It could be, I realized, that I was dealing with something so far removed from my own sector of the galaxy that the space patois familiar to that sector was not used by it and that we would have no communications bridge.

And then a quavering, hooting voice answered. At first it was just a noise, then, as I wrestled with the noise, I knew it to be a word, a single, hooted question.

"Friend?" had been the word.

"Friend," I answered.

"In need am I of friend," the hooting voice said. "Please to advance in safety. I do not carry weapon."

"I do," I said, a little grimly.

"Of it, there is no need," said the thing down in the shadows. "I am trapped and helpless."

"That is your ship up there?"

"Ship?"

"Your conveyance."

"Truly so, dear friend. It have come apart. It is inoperative."

"I'm coming down," I told it. "I'll have my weapon on you. One move out of you . . ."

"Come then," the hooter croaked. "No move out of me. I shall lie supine."

I came to my feet and went across the top of that dune as quickly as I could and plunging down the other slope, crouched to present as small a target as was possible. I kept the rifle trained on that shadowed area from which the voice came.

I slid into the trough and crouched there, bending low to sight up its length. Then I saw it, a hump of blackness lying very still.

"All right," I called. "Move toward me now."

The hump heaved and wallowed, then lay still again.

"Move," it said, "I cannot."

"OK, then. Lie still. Do not move at all."

I ran forward and stopped. The hump lay still. It did not even twitch.

I moved closer, watching it intently. Now I could see it better. From the front of its head a nest of tentacles sprouted, now lying limply on the ground. From its rather massive head, if the tentacle-bearing portion of it actually was its head, its body tapered back, four feet or so, and ended in a bluntness. It seemed to have no feet or arms. With those tentacles, perhaps, it had no need of arms. It wore no clothing, upon its body was no sign of any sort of harness. The tentacles grasped no tool or weapon.

"What is your trouble?" I asked. "What can I do for you?"

The tentacles lifted, undulating like a basketful of snakes. The hoarse voice came out of a mouth which the tentacles surrounded.

"My legs are short," it said. "I sink. They do not carry me. With them I only churn up sand. I dig with them a deeper pit beneath me."

Two of the tentacles, with eyes attached to their tips, were aimed directly at me. They looked me up and down.

"I can hoist you out of there."

"It would be a useless gesture," the creature said. "I'd bog down again."

The tentacles which served as eye-stalks moved up and down, measuring me.

"You are large," it croaked. "Have you also strength?"

"You mean to carry you?"

"Only to a place," the creature said, "where there is firmness under me."

"I don't know of such a place," I said.

"You do not know . . . Then you are not a native of this planet."

"I am not," I said. "I had thought, perhaps, that you . . ."

"Of this planet, sir?" it asked. "No self-respecting member of my race would deign to defecate upon such a planet."

I squatted down to face him.

"How about the ship?" I asked. "If I could get you back up the dune to it . . ."

"It would not help," he told me. "There is nothing there."

"But there must be. Food and water . . ."

And I was, I must admit, considerably interested in the water.

"No need of it," he said. "I travel in my second self and I need no food or water. Slight protection from the openness of space and a little heat so my living tissues come to no great harm."

For the love of God, I asked myself, what was going on? He was in his second self and while I wondered what it might be all about, I was hesitant to ask. I knew how these things went. First surprise or horror or amazement that there could exist a species so ignorant or so inefficient that it did not have the concept, the stammering attempt to explain the basics of it, followed by a dissertation on the advantages of the concept and the pity that was felt for ones who did not have it. Either that or the entire thing was taboo and not to be spoken of and an insult to even hint at what it might entail.

And that business about his living tissues. As if there might be more to him than simply living tissues.

It was all right, of course. A man runs into some strange things when he wanders out in space, but when he runs into them he can usually dodge them or disregard them and here I could do neither.

I had to do something to help this creature out, although for the life of me I couldn't figure just how I could help him much. I could pick

him up and lug him back to where the others waited, but once I'd got him there he'd be no better off than he was right here. But I couldn't turn about and walk away and simply leave him there. He at least deserved the courtesy of someone demonstrating that they cared what happened to him.

From the time I had seen the ship and had realized that it was newly crashed, the idea had arisen, of course, that aboard it I might find food and water and perhaps other articles that the four of us could use. But now, I admitted, the entire thing was a complete and total washout. I couldn't help this creature and he was no help to us and the whole thing wound up as just another headache and being stuck with him.

"I can't offer you much," I told him. "There are four of us, myself and three others. We have no food or water—absolutely nothing."

"How got you here?" he asked.

I tried to tell him how we had gotten there and as I groped and stumbled for a way to say it, I figured that I was just wasting my time. After all, what did it really matter how we had gotten there? But he seemed to understand.

"Ah, so," he said.

"So you can see how little we can do for you," I said.

"But you would essay to carry me to this place where the others are encamped?"

"Yes, I could do that."

"You would not mind?"

"Not at all," I told him, "if you'd like it that way."

I did mind, of course. It would be no small chore to wrestle him across the sand dunes. But I couldn't quite see myself assessing the situation and saying the hell with it and then walking out on him.

"I would like it very much," the creature said. "Other life is comfort and aloneness is not good. Also in numbers may lie strength. One can never tell."

"By the way," I said, "my name is Mike. I am from a planet called the Earth, out in the Carina Cygnus arm."

"Mike," he said, trying it out, hooting the name so it sounded like anything but Mike. "Is good. Rolls easy on the vocal cords. The locale of your planet is a puzzle to me. The terms I've never heard. The position of mine means nothing to you, too. And my name? My name is complicated matter involving identity framework that is of no conse-

quence to people but my own. Please, you pick a name for me. You can call me what you want. Short and simple, please."

It had been a little crazy, of course, to get started on this matter of our names. The funny thing about it was that I'd not intended to. It was something that had just come out of me, almost instinctively. I had been somewhat surprised when I'd heard myself telling him my name. But now that it had been done, it did make the situation a bit more comfortable. We no longer were two alien beings that had stumbled across one another's paths. It gave each of us, it seemed, a greater measure of identity.

"How about Hoot?" I asked. And I could have kicked myself the minute I had said it. For it was not the best name in the world and he would have had every reason for resenting it. But he didn't seem to. He waved his tentacles around in a snaky sort of way and repeated the name several times.

"Is good," he finally said. "Is excellent for creature such as me."

"Hello, Mike," he said.

"Hello, Hoot," I told him.

I slung the rifle on my shoulder and got my feet well planted and reached down to get both arms around him. Finally I managed to hoist him to the other shoulder. He was heavier than he looked and his body was so rounded that it was hard to get a grip on him. But I finally got him settled and well-balanced and started up the dune.

I didn't try to go straight up, but slanted at an angle. With my feet sinking to the ankles with every step I took and the sand sliding under me, and fighting for every inch of progress, it was just as bad, or worse, than I had thought it would prove to be.

But I finally reached the crest and collapsed as easily as I could, letting Hoot down gently, then just lying there and panting.

"I cause much trouble, Mike," said Hoot. "I tax your strength exceeding."

"Let me get my breath," I said. "It's just a little farther."

I rolled over on my back and stared up at the sky. The stars glittered back at me. Straight overhead was a big blue giant that looked like a flashing jewel and a little to one side was a dull coal of a star, a red supergiant, perhaps. And a million others—as if someone had sat down and figured out how to fill the sky with stars and had come up with a pattern.

"Where is this place, Hoot?" I asked. "Where in the galaxy?"

"It's a globular cluster," he said. "I thought you knew that."

And that made sense, I thought. For the planet we had landed on, the one that great fool of a Smith had led us to, had been well above the galactic plane, out in space beyond the main body of the galaxy—out in globular cluster country.

"Is your home here?" I asked.

"No. Far away," he said, and the way he said it, I asked him nothing more. If he didn't want to talk about where he'd come from, it was all right with me. He might be on the lam, he might be a refugee, or he might have been banished as an undesirable. All of these things happened. Space was full of wanderers who could not go home again.

I lay looking at the stars and wondering exactly where we were. A globular cluster, Hoot had said, and there were a lot of them and it could be, I supposed, any one of them. Distance or proximity, I realized, would not make a great deal of difference when one was shunted from one place to another by the method that had been used to get us here.

Nor did it make a great deal of difference where we were. If we failed to locate water, we'd not be here for long. Food, too, of course, but food was less critical than water. I wondered rather vaguely why I wasn't more upset. It might be, I told myself, that I had been in so many scrapes in so many alien places and had always, somehow, gotten out of them, that I had come to think I'd always be able to get out of them. Or maybe it was the ingrown realization that my margin of good luck had been more than overrun, that I was overdue to meet the end I had escaped so many times—a realization that someday some planet or some ornery critter would finally do me in. And realizing that, deciding that there was no great point to worry over it, for when that day came I'd had it and prior worry would not help at all.

I was trying to figure which it might be when something touched me softly on the shoulder. I switched my head around and saw that Hoot was tapping me with one of his tentacles.

"Mike," he croaked, "you should take a look. We are not alone."

I jerked bolt upright, grabbing at the rifle.

A wheel was coming up over the dune behind us, the one on which Hoot's spacecraft had come to grief. It was a big wheel and a bright one and it had a green hub that glistened in the moonlight. I could see only

part of it, but the monstrous, gleaming curve of it rose into the air above the dune a hundred feet or so. Its tread was broad—ten feet or more, I guessed—and it had the shine of polished steel. Hundreds of silvery spokes ran from the inside of the rim to the green and glistening hub.

It was not moving. It hung there in the air, poised above the dune. The moon-slivered ribs of Hoot's ship looked like a smashed toy when measured by its size.

"Living?" asked Hoot.

"Perhaps," I said.

"Then we best prepare to defend . . ."

"We sit right here," I snapped. "We don't raise a hand against it."

It was watching us, I was sure. Whatever it was, it might have come out to investigate the wreckage of Hoot's ship. There was nothing to indicate that any part of it was alive, but the greenish hub, for some reason I couldn't put a finger on, had the look of life about it. It might turn around in a little while and go away. And even if it didn't, we were in no position to start banging away at anything that moved.

"You better slide down into the trough," I told Hoot. "If we have to make a run for it, I can scoop you up."

He waggled a tentacle in disagreement. "I have weapon you may need."

"You said you had no weapon."

"Dirty lie," he hooted, cheerfully.

"You could have taken me," I protested, angrily, "any time you wished."

"Oh, no," he said. "You came as my befriender. Had I told you, you might not have come."

I let it pass. He was a tricky devil, but for the moment he was on my side and I had no objections.

Someone called back of me and I swiveled my head around. Sara stood on top of the next dune and off to the left of her, two heads poked above the ridge. She was planted on the crest, with her silly rifle at the ready and I was scared stiff that any minute she might start throwing lead.

"Are you all right, captain?" she called to me.

"I'm all right," I said.

"Can we be of any help?"

"Yes," I said. "You can lug my pal back to camp with you."

I said camp because, for the life of me, I could think of no other way to put it.

Out of the side of my mouth, I snarled at Hoot. "Cut out the goddamned foolishness and slide down into the trough."

I switched my attention back to the wheel. It stayed where it was. I still had the feeling that it was looking at me. I twisted around and got my feet planted under me, ready to take off if the situation should demand.

I heard Hoot go sliding down the slope. A moment later Sara called to me.

"What is this thing? Where did you find it?"

I looked around and she was standing over Hoot, staring down at him.

"Tuck," I yelled, "get down there and help Miss Foster. Tell Smith to stay exactly where he is."

I could envision that damn fool of a blind man trying to follow Tuck and getting all fouled up.

Sara's voice was plaintive and a little sharp. "But, captain . . ."

"He's lost just like us," I told her. "He doesn't belong here and he's in trouble. Just get him back to camp."

I looked back at the wheel. It had finally started to move, revolving slowly, almost majestically, walking up the dune slope and looming higher every minute.

"Get out of here," I yelled at Tuck and Sara, without looking back.

The wheel stopped. It was almost at the crest. Very little of it was hidden by the dune. It loomed high into the sky.

Now that I had a better chance to look it over, I saw that the strange thing about it was that it was actually a wheel and not just something that might look like a wheel. Its outer rim was formed of some sort of very shiny substance, with a tread ten feet across, but perhaps no more than a foot thick. For all its massiveness, it had a slender look about it. As it had climbed slowly up the dune, the rim had picked up sand and carried it up its rearward surface, with the sand spilling free as the wheel moved forward. The greenish hub floated in the center of the wheel—and floated was the word for it, for the fragile spokes, despite the number of them, could not have held the hub in place. And now I saw that the spokes, thin as they were, were crisscrossed by even finer wires (if they, indeed, were wires) to make the entire area between the hub and rim a sort of spider web. The thought stopped there, however, for

the hub itself had no semblance to a spider. It was simply a sphere of some sort, hanging in the center of the wheel.

I looked quickly over my shoulder and there was no sign of the others. The slope of the dune was scarred with deep-gouged tracks, where they had climbed it.

I got to my feet and went sliding down the slope and labored up the face of the dune. At the top I turned and had a look. The wheel had stayed where it was. I went down the slope and climbed the dune behind which I had left the others. They were all down there, I saw, and the wheel still hadn't moved. Maybe this was the end of it, I thought. The wheel might have come out to have a look and now, satisfied at what it had seen, might go about its business.

I went sliding down the slope and Sara came climbing up to meet me. Her face was very solemn. "We may have a chance," she said.

"A chance of getting out of here?"

"You told this Hoot of yours what happened," she said. "He seems to know about this sort of thing."

I was astonished. "I wasn't even sure he knew what I was talking about," I told her.

"He didn't understand entirely, but he asked some questions and now they're working on it."

"They?"

"Tuck and George are helping. George is very good at it. It seems he is able to pick out the door."

"George would be able to," I said.

"I wish you'd stop not liking George," she said.

It was no time to get into a hassle with her, so I went on down the dune.

The three of them were squatting in a row—or at least the other two of them were squatting and Hoot was lying there, with his legs buried in the sand. Tuck was staring fixedly ahead and Smith had an intense, excited look upon his flabby face. All Hoot's tentacles were extended straight in front of him and the tips of them were quivering.

I looked where Tuck was looking and I couldn't see a thing. There was just the slope of the other dune pitching upward to the sky.

I stood quietly behind them and Sara came up and stood beside me. We didn't stir a muscle. I didn't know what was going on, but whatever it might be, I didn't want to interfere. If they thought there was a chance to bust that door wide open, I was all in favor of it.

Suddenly Hoot's tentacles went limp and sagged down to the ground. Tuck and Smith slumped in upon themselves. It was quite apparent that whatever they had tried had failed.

"More strength we need," said Hoot. "If all of us, perhaps . . ."

"All of us?" I asked. "I'm afraid I'm no good at this sort of thing. What is it you are trying?"

"We strain upon the door," said Hoot. "We try to pull it open."

"It still is there," said George. "I can sense the edges of it."

"We can try," said Sara. "That's the least that we can do."

She squatted down beside Hoot.

"What do we do?" she asked.

"You try to visualize the door," said Tuck.

"Then you pull," said Hoot.

"Pull with what?" I asked.

"With your mind," Tuck said, nastily. "This is a time, captain, when a big mouth and muscles do not help at all."

"Friar Tuck," said Sara, coldly, "that was very much uncalled for."

"That's all he'd been doing," Tuck declared, "ever since we set foot upon the ship. Yelling at us and pushing us around."

"Brother," I said, "if that is what you think, once we're out of this . . ."

"Be quiet, the two of you," said Sara. "Captain, if you please."

She patted the sand beside her and I squatted down with the rest of them, feeling mortified and foolish. In all my life, I'd never seen such downright stupidity. Oh, there was no doubt about it—there were some alien folk who could accomplish wonders with their mental powers, but we were human beings (all of us but one) and the human race had never been noted for anything like that. Although, I thought, take a couple of jerks like Tuck and George and anything might happen.

"Now, please," said Hoot, "all of us together leave us bring forth the door."

His tentacles shot out in front of him, so fast they seemed to snap, standing out rigidly with their tips a-quiver.

God knows, I tried to concentrate. I tried to see a door in front of us and, so help me, I did see it, a sort of ghostly door with a thin edge of light around it, and once I saw it, I tried to pull on it, but there was nothing on it for a man to grab a hold of and with nothing to grab a hold on there was little chance of pulling. But I tried just the same and

kept on trying. I could almost feel the fingers of my mind trying to get hold of its smooth and slippery surfaces, then slowly sliding off.

We would never make it, I knew. The door seemed to be coming open a bit, for the crack of light around it appeared to have widened. But it would take too long; we never could hold out to get it open wide enough so we could slide through.

I was getting terribly tired—both mentally and physically, it seemed—and I knew the others could be in no better shape. We would try again, of course, and again and again, but we'd be getting weaker all the time and if we couldn't get it open in the first several tries, I knew that we were sunk.

So I tried the harder and I seemed to get some small hold on it and pulled with all my might and could feel the others pulling, too—and the door began to open, swinging back toward us on invisible hinges until there was room enough for a man to get his hand into the crack, that is, if the door had been really there. But I knew, even as I pulled and sweated mentally, that the door had no physical existence and that it was something a man could never lay a hand on.

Then, with the door beginning to open, we failed. All of us together. And there was no door. There was nothing but the dune climbing up the sky.

Something crunched behind us and I jumped up and swung around. The wheel loomed tall above us, crunching to a halt, and swarming down from the green mass in the center, swinging down the silvery spider web between the rim and hub was a blob that dripped. It was not a spider, although the basic shape of it and the way it came scrambling down the web brought a spider to one's mind. A spider would have been friendly and cozy alongside this monstrosity that came crawling down the web. It was a quivering obscenity, dripping with some sort of filthy slime, and it had a dozen legs or arms, and at one end of the dripping blob was what might have been a face—and there is no way to put into words the kind of horror that it carried with it, the loathesome feeling of uncleanliness just from seeing it, as if the very sight of it were enough to contaminate one's flesh and mind, the screaming need to keep one's distance from it, the fear that it might come close enough to touch one.

As it came down the web it was making a noise and steadily, it seemed, the noise became louder. Although it had what one could imagine was its face, it had no mouth with which to make the noise, but

even with no mouth, the noise came out of it and washed over us. In the noise was the crunch of great teeth splintering bones, mixed with the slobbering of a scavenger gulping at a hasty, putrid feast, and an angry chittering that had unreason in it. It wasn't any of these things alone; it was all of them together, or the sense of all of them together, and perhaps if a man had been forced to go on listening to it for long enough he might have detected in it other sounds as well.

It reached the rim of the wheel and leaped off the web to land upon the dune—spraddled there, looming over us, with the filthiness of it dripping off its body and splashing on the sand. I could see the tiny balls of wet sand where the nastiness had dropped.

It stood there, raging at us, the noise of it filling all that world of sand and bouncing off the sky.

And in the noise there seemed to be a word, as if the word were hidden and embedded in the strata of the sound. Bowed down beneath that barrage of sound, it seemed that finally I could feel—not hear, but feel—the word.

"Begone!" it seemed to shout at us. "Begone! Begone! Begone!"

From somewhere out of that moonlit-starlit night, from that land of heaving dunes, came a wind, or some force like a wind, that hammered at us and drove us back—although, come to think of it, it could not have been a wind, for no cloud of sand came with it and there was no roaring such as a wind would make. But it hit us like a fist and staggered us and sent us reeling back.

As I staggered back with the loathsome creature still spraddled on the dune and still raging at us, I realized that there was no longer sand underneath my feet, but some sort of paving.

Then, quite suddenly, the dune was no longer there, but a wall, as if a door we could not see had been slammed before our faces, and when this happened the creature's storm of rage came to an end and in its stead was silence.

But not for long, that silence, for Smith began an insane crying: "He is back again! My friend is back again! He is in my mind again! He has come back to me. . . ."

"Shut up!" I yelled at him. "Shut up that yammering!"

He quieted down a bit, but he went on muttering, flat upon his bottom, with his legs stuck out in front of him and that silly, sickening look of ecstasy painted on his face.

I took a quick look around and saw that we were back where we had

come from, in that room with all the panels and behind each panel the shimmering features of another world.

Safely back, I thought with some thankfulness, but through no effort of our own. Finally, given time enough, we might have hauled that door wide enough for us to have gotten through. But we hadn't had to do it; it had been done for us. A creature from that desert world had come along and thrown us out.

The night that had lain over the white world when we had been brought there had given way to day. Through the massive doorway, I could see the faint yellow light of the sun blocked out by the towering structures of the city.

There was no sign of the hobbies or of the gnomelike humanoid who had picked the world into which the hobbies threw us.

I shucked up my britches and took the gun off my shoulder. I had some scores to settle.

4

We found them in a large room, which appeared to be a storeroom, one flight down from the lobby that had the doors to all those other worlds.

The little gnomelike creature had our luggage spread out on the floor and was going through it. Several bundles of stuff had been sorted out and he was going through another bag, with the rest of it all stacked neatly to one side, waiting his attention.

The hobbies stood in a semicircle about him, looking on and rocking most sedately and while they had no expression on their carven faces, I thought that I detected in them a sense of satisfaction at having made so good a haul.

They were so engrossed in what was going on that none of them

noticed us until we were through the door and had advanced several paces into the room. Then the hobbies, seeing us, reared back upon their rockers and the ghome began to straighten slowly, as if his back might have grown stiff from standing all bent over to go through our things. Still half bent over, he stared up at us through a tangle of unruly hair that hung down across his eyes. He looked like an English sheepdog looking up at us.

All of us stopped and stood together. We didn't speak, but waited.

The gnome finally straightened up by degrees, very cautiously and slowly. The hobbies stayed motionless, reared back on their rockers.

The gnome rubbed his gnarled hands together. "We were about, my lord," he said, "to come after you."

I motioned with my gun toward the luggage on the floor. He looked at it and shook his head.

"A mere formality," he said. "An inspection for the customs."

"With a view to a heavy tax?" I asked. "A very heavy tax."

"Oh, not at all," he said. "It is merely that there are certain things which must not be allowed upon the planet. Although, if you should be willing, a small gratuity, perhaps. We have so little opportunity to collect anything of value. And we do render services of which you are much in need. The shelter against the danger and the . . ."

I looked around the storeroom. It was piled with crates and baskets and other kinds of less conventionalized containers and there were articles of all sorts all heaped and piled together.

"It seems to me," I said, "that you've been doing not too badly. If you ask me, I think you had no thought to get us. We could have stayed in that desert world forever if it had been up to you."

"I swear," he said. "We were about to open up the door. But we became so interested in the wonderful items that you carried with you that we quite lost track of time."

"Why did you put us there to start with?" Sara asked. "In the desert world?"

"Why, to protect you from the deadly vibrations," he explained. "We, ourselves, took cover. Each time a ship lands there are these vibrations. They always come at night, before the dawning of the day that follows the landing of the ship."

"An earthquake?" I asked. "A shaking of the planet."

"Not of the planet," said the gnome. "A shaking of the senses. It

congeals the brain, it bursts the flesh. There can nothing live. That is why we put you in that other world—to save your very lives."

He was lying to us. He simply had to be. Or at least he was lying about his intention to bring us back from the desert world. The kind of rat he was, there was no reason that he should. He had everything we had; there would have been nothing for him to gain by getting us out of the world he'd thrown us into.

"Buster," I said, "I don't buy a word of what you say. Why should the landing of a ship set off vibrations of that kind?"

He laid a crooked finger alongside his bulbous nose. "The world is closed," he said. "None is welcome here. When visitors do come the world makes certain that they die before they can leave the city. And if they should so manage to escape, the planet seals the ship so they can't take off again and spread the word of what they found."

"And yet," I said, "there is a strong directional beam, a homing beam, reaching well out into space. A beam to lure them in. You lured us in and you got rid of us in the desert world and you had everything we had taken from the ship. You had everything but the ship and maybe you are working on how to get the ship—our ship and all the others that are standing out there, sealed. No wonder the hobbies insisted on bringing all our luggage in. They knew what would happen to the ship. Apparently you haven't figured out how to beat this sealing business yet."

He shook his head. "It's a part of the closed planet routine, sir. There must be a way to get around it, but it's not been ciphered yet."

Now that he knew I had him pegged, he'd not bother to deny it. He'd admit everything or almost everything and hope to gain some credit for being frank and forthright. Why was it, I wondered, that so many primates, no matter where you found them, turned out to be such stinkers?

"Another thing that I can't cipher," said the gnome, "is how you all got back here. Never before has there been anyone who could come back from one of the other worlds. Not till we let them out."

"And you claim you were going to let us out?"

"Yes, I swear we were. And you can have all your things. We had no intention of keeping any of them."

"Now, that is fine," I said. "You're becoming reasonable. But there are other things we want."

He bristled a little. "Like what?" he asked.

"Information," I told him. "About another man. A humanoid very much like us. He would have had a robot with him."

He glanced around, trying to make up his mind. I twitched the muzzle of the gun and helped him make it up.

"Long ago," he said. "Very long ago."

"He was the only one to come? The only one of us?"

"No. Even longer ago than him there were others of you. Six or seven of them. They went out beyond the city and that was the last I saw of them."

"You didn't put them into another world?"

"Why, yes, of course," he said. "All who come we put there. It is necessary. Each arrival triggers another killing wave. Once that killing wave is done, we are safe until another ship arrives. We put all who arrive into another world, but we always bring them out."

Perhaps, I admitted to myself, he was telling us the truth. Although maybe not all the truth. Perhaps he had another angle that he hadn't sprung on us. Although now, I was fairly certain, even if he had another one he might hesitate to spring it. We had him dead to rights.

"But there is always another killing wave," I reminded him, "when another ship arrives."

"But only in the city," he told me. "Out of the city and you are safe from it."

"And no one, once they arrive, stays in the city?"

"No. They always leave the city. To hunt for something they think they'll find outside the city. All of them always hunt for something."

God, yes, I thought, all of them are on the trail of something. How many other intelligences, in how many different forms, had heard that voice Smith had heard and had been lured to follow it?

"Do they ever tell you," Sara asked, "what it is they hunt for?"

He grinned crookedly. "They are secretive," he said.

"But this other humanoid," Sara reminded him. "The one who came alone, accompanied by the robot . . ."

"Robot? You mean the metal humanoid very like himself?"

"Don't play dumb," I snapped. "You know what a robot is. Those hobbies there are robots."

"We not be robots," Dobbin said. "We be honest hobbies."

"You shut up," I said.

"Yes," said the gnome. "The one with the robot. He also went away

and did not come back. But in time the robot did. Although he would tell me nothing. He had not a word to say."

"And the robot still is here?" asked Sara.

The gnome said, "A part of him I have. The part that makes him function, I regret very much, is gone. The brain I suppose you call it. The brain of him is gone. I sold it to the wild hobbies that dwell in the wilderness. Very much they wanted it, very much they paid. Still I could not refuse them. It was worth my life to do it."

"Those wild hobbies?" I asked. "Where do we go to find them?"

He made a shrugging motion. "No telling that," he said. "They wander wide and far. Most often they are found north of here. Very wild indeed."

"What did the wild hobbies want of Roscoe's brain?" asked Sara. "What possible use could it be to them?"

He spread his hands. "How could I know?" he asked. "They are beings one does not question closely. Very rough and wild. They have a hobby's body, but heads they have like you, and arms, and they yell most loudly and are unreasonable."

"Centaurs," said Tuck. "There are many of them, I understand, spread throughout the galaxy. Almost as common as the humanoids. And they are, I understand, as the gentleman here says, most unreasonable. Although I have never met one."

"You sold them only the braincase," I said. "You still have the robot's body here."

"They did not want the body. I still have it here."

I dropped the space lingo and switched to English, speaking to Sara. "What do you think?" I asked. "Do we try to track down Knight?"

"He would be the one . . ."

"If he is still alive, he'd be an old, old man by now. I think the chances are he is not alive. The robot came back. He'd not have left Knight if he were still alive."

"We might find out where he was heading," Sara said. "If we could get the braincase and put it back in Roscoe's body, he might have some idea of what Knight was looking for and where it might be found."

"But he wasn't talking. He wouldn't tell the gnome."

"He might talk to us," said Sara. "After all, we're his people. It was people like us who made him and if he had any loyalty, which I suspect he had, that loyalty also was to a human being."

I turned back to the gnome. "All right," I said, "we'll need the robot's

body and maps of the planet. A supply of water. The hobbies to carry us and our packs and . . ."

He threw up his hands in horror, backing away from me, shaking his head stubbornly from side to side. "The hobbies you can't have," he said. "I have need of them myself."

"You didn't let me finish," I said. "We are taking you along."

"That you cannot do," shrilled Dobbin. "He must stay to warn the creatures on incoming ships and get them under cover against the killing wave. Sire, you must understand . . ."

"We'll take care of all of that," I said. "We'll shut off the beam. If there is no beam to lure them, no one will ever come."

"But you can't shut it off," wailed the gnome. "No one can do that, for the location of the transmitter is something that we do not know. I have never found it. I have hunted and the others before me hunted and it has not been found."

He stood before us, dejected. Somehow or other the props had been knocked out from under him.

"Well, I be damned," I said.

"It makes sense," said Sara. "It had me puzzled all the time. Whoever built this city installed the beam and our scrawny friend is not the kind of people who could have built this city. He is simply living here—a savage living in a deserted city, picking up whatever scraps he can."

I should have thought of it myself, I knew. But I had been so burned up at being tossed into the desert world, and burned up, too, when I found the gnome going through our things that I'd been out for blood. If that little twirp had made one wrong step, I would have mowed him down.

"Tell us," Sara said to him, "exactly what you are. It wasn't your people who built this city, was it?"

His face was contorted with rage. "You have no right to ask," he screeched. "It is bad enough without you asking it."

"We have every right to ask," I said. "We need to know exactly what is going on. I'll give you about five seconds."

He didn't take five seconds. His legs collapsed and he sat down hard upon the floor. He wrapped his scrawny arms about his middle, hard, and rocked back and forth as if he had the bellyache.

"I'll tell," he moaned. "Do not shoot—I'll tell. But the shame of it! The shame, the shame, the shame."

He looked up at me with beseeching eyes. "I cannot lie," he said. "If I could, I would. But there is someone here who would know if I were lying . . ."

"Who is that?" I asked.

"It is me," said Hoot.

"What have you got?" I asked. "A built-in lie detector?"

"One of my feeble capabilities," said Hoot. "Do not ask me how, for I cannot tell you. Deficiencies I have in amplitude, but of this and several others I have good command. And this personage, aware of it, has been telling a semblance of the truth, although not in all its fullness."

The gnome was still staring up at me. "It seems that in times like this," he pleaded, "us humanoids should somehow stick together. There is a common bond . . ."

I said, "Not between you and I, there isn't."

"You are being hard on him," said Sara.

"Miss Foster," I said, "I haven't even started. I intend to hear this."

"But if he has any reason . . ."

"He hasn't any reason. Have you a reason, Buster?"

He had a good look at me, then he shook his head.

"My pride is in the dust," he said. "The memories of my ancestors are besmirched. It has been so long—we pretended for so long that at times even we ourselves believed it—that we were the ones who raised this wondrous city. And if you had let me alone, if you had never come, I finally could have died believing it, warm in the pretence that it were we who built it. Then it would have been all over, it would not have mattered if someone, or all the universe, should know we were not the architects. For I am the last of us and there is no one further to whom it will ever matter. There are no others after me. The duties I've performed then will be passed on to the hobbies and in the fullness of time they may find some other to whom they can pass those duties on. For there must be someone here to warn and save those who arrive upon this planet."

I looked toward Dobbin. "Could you tell me," I asked, "what this is all about?"

"Nothing I will tell you, sire," said Dobbin. "You come to us with a heavy hand. We save your life by putting you in another world, then you suspicion we will not get you out. You are incensed greatly when you find your benefactor satisfying no more than normal curiosity in an

examination of your luggage. And you talk of the giving of five seconds and you throw your weight around and act vastly ungracious in every sort of way and you . . ."

"That's enough from you!" I shouted. "I won't take that kind of talk from a crummy robot!"

"We not be robots," Dobbin primly said. "I have told you, yet and yet again, that we be but simple hobbies."

So we were back to that again, to this ridiculous assertion, this strange and stubborn pride. If I'd not been so sore at them, I would have bust out laughing. But as it stood, I'd had about as much of what was going on as I was able to take.

I reached down and grabbed the gnome by the slack of his robe that hung about his chest and lifted him. He dangled and his scrawny legs kicked and kept on kicking as if he were trying to run, but couldn't, since his feet were in the air.

"I've had enough of this," I told him. "I don't know what it is all about and I don't give a damn, but you're giving us what we need and without any quibbling. If you don't, I'll snap your filthy neck."

"Look out!" screamed Sara and as I jerked my head around, I saw the hobbies charging us, rocking forward on their rear rockers and their front rockers lifted menacingly.

I threw the gnome away. I didn't look where I was throwing him. I just heaved him out of there and brought up my gun, remembering, with a sinking feeling, the lack of impression the laser beam had made upon that crystal landing field. If the hobbies were fabricated of the same material, and it looked as if they were, I'd do just as well by standing off and pegging rocks at them.

But even as I brought the rifle up, Hoot scurried quickly forward and as he scurried forward, suddenly he blazed. That's an awkward way of saying it, but I can't think of any other way of describing it. There he was, scampering forward, his little feet clicking on the floor, then his body quivered with a bluish sort of haze, as if he were an electrical transformer that had gone haywire. The air seemed to shake and everything did a funny sort of jig, then it all was over and the way it was before. Except that all the hobbies were piled into a far corner of the room, all tangled up together, with their rockers waving in the air. I hadn't seen them move—they just suddenly were there. It was as if they had been moved without actually traveling through space. One instant

they had been charging us, with their rockers lifted, the next instant they were jammed into the corner.

"They be all right," said Hoot, apologetically. "They damaged not at all. They be discommoded for the moment only. They be of use again. Sorry for surprise, but need of moving rapidly."

The gnome was picking himself up slowly from the tangle of barrels and boxes and baskets where I had thrown him and I could see, just by looking at him, he had no fight left in him. Neither had the hobbies.

"Tuck," I said, "get moving. Get the stuff together. As soon as we can get the hobbies loaded, we are moving out."

5

The city pressed close. It towered on every side. Its walls went straight up into the sky and where they stopped (if they did stop, for down at their base one had the feeling he could not be sure) there existed only a narrow strip of blue, sky so far and faint that it faded out almost to the whiteness of the walls. The narrow street did not run straight; it jogged and twisted, a trickle of a street that ran between the boulders that were buildings. The buildings all were the same. There was slight difference among them. There was no such a concept as architecture, unless one could call straight lines and massiveness a kind of architecture.

Everything was white, even the floor of the street we followed—and the floor could not be thought of as paving; it was, instead, a floor, a slab that extended between the buildings as if it were a part of them, and a slab that seemed to run on forever and forever, without a single joint or seam. There seemed no end to it, nor to the city either. One had the feeling that he would never leave the city, that he was caught and trapped and that there was no way out.

"Captain," said Sara, walking along beside me, "I'm not entirely sure I approve of the manner in which you handle things."

I didn't bother to answer her. I knew that dissatisfaction with me had been nibbling at her for days—on board the ship and after we had landed. Sooner or later, it was certain that she would get around to chewing on me about it and there was nothing I could have said that would have made a difference.

I threw a glance over my shoulder and saw that the others were coming along behind us—Smith and Tuck riding two of the hobbies and the rest of them loaded with our supplies and tins of water. Behind the hobbies came Hoot, like a dog hazing a flock of sheep, and at times sidewheeling along the way a dog will run. His body was built low to the ground and on each side of it he had a couple of dozen stubby legs, like a centipede, and I knew that so long as he was back there behind them, the hobbies would try no monkey business. They were scared pink of him.

"You are heavy handed," Sara said when I didn't answer her. "You simply bull ahead. You have absolutely no finesse and I think in time that can lead to trouble."

"You are talking about the gnome," I said.

"You could have reasoned with him."

"Reasoned with him and he about to steal us blind?"

"He said he would have gotten us out of that other world," she said, "and I'm inclined to have believed him. There have been other parties here and he must have pulled them back out of the worlds he put them in and let them go ahead."

"In such a case," I said, "please account for all that loot he had the storeroom jammed with."

"He maybe stole some of it," admitted Sara, "or he ran a bluff and got some of it before they started out or some of the expeditions failed and he went out and picked up the stuff after they had failed."

It was possible, I knew, any one of the alternatives she suggested could be possible. But somehow I didn't think so. The gnome had said that we had been the first to get out of one of the other worlds without any help from him, but that could have been a lie, perhaps calculated to make us feel good about being so smart we had gotten out of it. And we really hadn't gotten out of it. We'd been thrown out of it, and there was a good chance that some of the other parties that had landed here had

been thrown out as well. The residents of those other worlds must by now be tired of having someone keep on dumping aliens in on them.

But not all of the people dumped into those other worlds would have been thrown out and that would have meant that the gnome and his pals, the hobbies, would have had good pickings. Although what good all that stuff was doing them was hard to figure out. They couldn't begin to use all of it and on a planet such as this, with a built-in trap for any who might land on it, there'd be little chance of trading with someone out in space. The gnome apparently did a little local trading, for he'd sold Roscoe's braincase to a centaur tribe, but the local trading couldn't amount to so very much.

"Speaking of the gnome," said Sara. "At first you threatened you'd bring him along with us and then you didn't bring him. Personally, since we're running this kind of show, I'd feel better if we had him where we could keep an eye on him."

"I couldn't stand his whining and his bawling," I told her, shortly. "And, besides, once it became apparent we weren't hauling him along, he got so happy about it that he let us take the other things we needed without any argument. Including what is left of Roscoe and all that water and the maps."

We walked along in silence for a moment, but she still wasn't satisfied. She was sore at me. She didn't like the way I operated and she meant to tell me so, very forcefully, and she wasn't having much success.

"I don't like this Hoot of yours," she said. "He's a crawly sort of creature."

"He saved our necks when the hobbies went for us," I said. "I suppose you're all knotted up because you don't understand what he used to hit the hobbies. Me, I don't care what he used, just so he still has it and can use it again if we get into a jam. And I don't care how crawly he may seem, just so he stays with us. We need a guy like him."

She flared at me. "That's a crack at the rest of us. You don't like George and you don't like Tuck and you're barely civil to me. And you call everybody Buster. I don't like people who call other people Buster."

I took a long, deep breath and began to count to ten, but I didn't wait till ten.

"Miss Foster," I told her, "you undoubtedly recall all that money you transferred to my account on Earth. All I'm trying to do now is to earn

all that lovely money. And I'm going to earn it no matter what you do or say. You don't have to like me. You don't have to approve of anything I do. But you're signed onto this harebrained scheme just like all the rest of us and I'm in charge of it because you put me in charge of it and I'm going to stay in charge of it and you haven't a damned thing to say about it until we're back on Earth again—if we are ever back."

I didn't know what she might do. I didn't care too much. This business had been building up for a long time now, since shortly after we had taken off from Earth and there had to be an end to it or we'd all go down the drain. Although, to tell the truth, I figured we were part-way down the drain already. There was something about the planet that made a man uneasy—something furtively vicious, a hard coldness like the coldness of a squinted eye, a thing a man couldn't put a finger on and perhaps was afraid to put a finger on because of what he'd find. And how were we to get off the planet with our ship sealed shut?

I thought maybe she'd stop right there in the street and throw a tantrum at me. I thought maybe she might try to brain me with her rifle or maybe try to shoot me.

She did nothing of the sort. She just kept walking along beside me. She never broke her stride. Then quietly, almost conversationally, she said, "What a sleazy son-of-a-bitch you turned out to be."

And it was all right. I probably deserved it. I'd been rough on her, but I'd had to be. She had to understand and, anyhow, I'd been called lot worse things than that.

We kept walking along and I wondered what time it was. My watch said we'd been walking down the street for a bit better than six hours, but that didn't mean a thing, for I hadn't the least idea of how long this planet's day might be.

I tried to keep a sharp lookout as we went along, but I had no idea what I was watching for. The city seemed deserted, but that didn't mean there couldn't be something very nasty in it that might come popping out at us. It was all too quiet and innocent. A place like this begged for someone or something to be living in it.

The streets were narrow, the one that we were following and the others that ran off from it. The buildings rose straight up from them and went soaring upward. There were occasional breaks in the blank, white walls that probably were windows, but didn't look like windows. Usually several small, unpretentious doors fronted the street from each

building, but at times there were great ramps leading up through a recess sliced out of a building's front up to massive doors that stood several stories high. Seldom were any of these doors closed; most of them stood open. Someone, sometime, had built this city and used it for a while and then had walked away from it, not even bothering to close the doors when they turned their backs on it.

The street jogged suddenly and as we came around the corner we were looking down a narrow lane where the street ran straight for a much greater distance than it had run straight all the time we had traveled on it. And far off, at the end of the street, stood a tree, one of those great trees that towered above the city. We had seen some of them when we'd been out on the landing field, but this was the first one we'd seen since. Traveling in the street, the buildings stood so high that they cut off the sight of everything that wasn't directly overhead.

I stopped and Sara stopped beside me. Behind us the hobbies shuffled to a halt. Now that the clanking of the hobbies' rockers was still I could hear the crooning sound. I had been hearing it for some time, I realized, but had paid no attention to it, for it had been blotted out by the noise made by the rockers.

But the hobbies were standing silent now and the crooning still kept on and when I swung around I saw it came from Smith. He was sitting in the saddle, rocking gently back and forth and he was making these cooing sounds like a happy baby.

I was standing there and saying nothing when Sara said, "Well, go ahead and say it."

"I haven't said a thing," I told her, "and I won't say anything. But if he doesn't shut his trap, I'll rig a muzzle for him."

"It's only happiness," said Tuck. "Surely, captain, you can't complain at a little happiness. We are getting very close, it seems, to the creature that has been talking with him all these years and he's almost beside himself with an inner happiness."

Smith paid no attention to what was going on. He just sat humped there on the hobby, crooning to himself like a half-wit baby.

"Let's get on," I said. I had been ready to call a halt so we could rest and have a bite to eat, but for some reason this didn't seem to be the place for it. Although maybe that wasn't it at all—maybe I wanted to get going so that the sound of the hobbies' rockers would drown out that sound of crooning.

I expected Sara might protest that I was driving everyone too hard, that it was time to take a rest, but she fell into step beside me and we went on down the street without a word from her.

The tree that stood at the end of the street kept getting bigger all the time, or seemed to be getting bigger. It was only, of course, that as we drew closer to it, we began to get a better perspective of it. Finally we could see that it stood a little distance beyond where the street came to an end and that it seemed to be twice as tall, perhaps more than twice as tall, as the buildings that stood on either side of the street. And that meant twice as tall as any of the buildings in the city, for the buildings here were as tall as any we'd seen in the center of the city.

The sun was slanting toward the west when we finally reached the end of the street, and it really was the end. The city stopped, just like that, and open country lay beyond, a red and yellow land, not exactly desert, but very close to it, a land with buttes and the far-off blue of mountain ranges and here and there the trees. There was other vegetation, little scrubby stuff, but the only thing that reached any height were those monstrous trees. Only the one of them was close, perhaps three miles or so away, although it was hard, admittedly, to judge its distance.

The street ended and a trail went on as a continuation of it—not a road, but a trail that over many years had been worn down a couple of feet or so into the very soil. It went winding out, twisting and turning, into that red and yellow land. A mile or so beyond the city stood a single building, not as massive as the buildings that made up the city, but still good-sized. It was not like the buildings of the city, not just one huge rectangular mass. Rather, it was a frothy sort of thing, but solid and without any foolishness about its frothiness. It was built of some kind of red material and that alone was enough to set it out from the whiteness of the buildings in the city. It had spires and towers and what seemed to be windows, high up, and a huge ramp sprang up to three mighty doors that stood open on its front.

"Captain Ross," said Sara, "perhaps we should call a halt. It's been a long, hard day."

Maybe she expected that I would argue with her, but I didn't. It had been a long, hard day and it was time to call a halt. I should have done it sooner, perhaps, but I had felt an itch to get out of the city, if that were possible. We'd been marching steadily for eight hours or more and the sun still was only a little better than halfway down the western sky.

There still would be several hours of light, but we'd done enough for one day. The days must run long here, I told myself.

"Over by the building," I suggested. "After we set up camp, we can have a look at it."

She nodded and we started out again. Smith still was crooning, but you could only hear the crooning in between the creaking sounds made by the rockers of the hobbies. If he kept it up once we set up camp, I'd be hard put to keep from belting him into at least a semblance of silence. To let him keep on with that silly sound was more than a man should have to stand.

Inside the city we had been shielded from the sun, but now the sun was warm—not hot, but warm, with that welcome, heartening warmness one associates with spring. It felt good just to be walking in the sunlight. The air was clean and had a sharpness to it and it carried in it a redolent scent of vegetation, a resinous, spicy scent that tingled in the nostrils.

Ahead of us the red building stood stark against the cloudless sky, its towers and spires seeming to reach up to pierce that very sky. It was good to get out of the city, to be where we could see the sky again, and it gave me the feeling that we were finally on our way, wherever we were going.

I wondered once again just how crazy one could get. If we followed this snaking trail we just might find the centaur people who had bought Roscoe's brain and if they still happened to have it they might sell it back to us, and if we could get it somehow we could pop it back into Roscoe's body and just possibly he might be able to tell us what the whole thing was about.

In my time I'd been on wild-goose chases of my own, but to whomp up a honey, I told myself, it took a female big game hunter and a dreaming blind man and a sneaky little religico with dirty fingernails. There might be better combinations, but until a better one came along, those three would stand as tops.'

We were about halfway to the building when behind me startled, frightened screams burst out and as I turned I saw the hobbies charging down upon us. Hardly thinking of what I was doing, I dived sidewise off the trail and as I dived caught Sara around the waist and carried her along with me. Together we rolled out to one side of the path and the hobbies went rushing past us, their rockers moving so fast they seemed to be a blur. Both Smith and Tuck were hanging on to the saddles

desperately and Tuck's brown robe was flowing out behind him, snapping in the wind. The hobbies were pounding as hard as they could go straight for the ramp that led into the building, screaming as they went—screams that sent cold shivers running up my spine.

I was halfway to my feet when something exploded just above my head, not a loud explosion, but rather a muffled thump, and dark red pellets went whizzing through the air and bouncing on the ground.

I didn't know what was going on, but it was quite apparent that this was not a place to stay. The hobbies might know what was happening and they had headed for the ramp and I was more than willing to do my best to follow. I jerked Sara to her feet and we started running for the ramp.

Off to the right was another thump and more of the dark-red pellets went skittering across the ground, raising little puffs of dust as they bounced along.

"It's the tree!" cried Sara, gasping for breath. "The tree is throwing things at us!"

I jerked up my head and saw that a number of dark balls were flying through the air above us and they certainly did seem to be coming from the tree.

"Look out!" I yelled at Sara and gave her a push that sent her staggering to the ground, falling there myself. Above us the dark balls were going thump! thump! thump! and the air seemed to be filled with the pellets, whizzing wickedly. One caught me in the ribs and it felt as if a mule had kicked me and another clipped me on the cheek.

"Now!" I yelled at Sara and jerked her to her feet. She broke free of my clutching hand and beat me to the ramp. All around us the dull thumps were exploding and the floor of the ramp danced with the bouncing pellets, but we made it up the ramp without being hit and stumbled through the door.

The others all were there, the hobbies huddled in a frightened group and Hoot scurrying up and down in front of them, like a worried sheepdog. Tuck was slumped in his saddle and Smith had quit his crooning, but instead of slumping, he was sitting straight or as straight as his tubbiness would let him, and his face was glowing with a silly sort of happiness that was downright frightening.

Outside the door the dark balls still were plunging in and exploding with their muffled crumps, throwing out sprays of the whizzing pellets that struck and bounced in dancing frenzy all along the ramp.

I took a look at Sara and she was somewhat mussed. Her natty explorer outfit was wrinkled and dusty and she had a dark smudge across one cheek.

I grinned at her. Through it all, I saw, she'd hung onto her rifle. I wondered if she had it glued to her.

Something small and running very fast went past me and then another one and as the tiny runners burst out onto the ramp I saw they were ratlike creatures. Each of them grabbed one of the bouncing pellets in their mouth, grabbing them even as they bounced, and then they were coming back, with their rodent teeth locked about the pellets.

From the darkness behind us came a rustling sound, interspersed with squeaks, and a second later hundreds of those ratlike creatures were pouring past us, running between our feet, bumping against our legs in their maddened haste, all heading for the ramp and the bouncing pellets.

With the coming of the ratlike horde, the hobbies had scurried to one side, beyond the doorway, to get out of the way. We followed the hobbies. The little scurrying animals paid us no attention. Their only interest were the pellets and they dashed back and forth, fetching and carrying as if their lives depended on it, running into one another, leaping over one another, each one for itself.

Outside the dark balls kept coming in, bursting with dull thumps, continuing to scatter pellets.

Hoot came over beside me, pulled up his feet and collapsed upon his belly. He let his tentacles down upon the floor.

"They harvest food," he said, "against the coming of great hunger."

I nodded. It made sense, of course. The dark balls were pods filled with seeds and this broadcasting of them was the method by which the trees could give them distribution. But they likewise were something more than pods of seed. They could be used as weapons and they had been used on us. As if the tree had been aware of us and once we'd come in range, had opened fire. If the range had been a little shorter and if we'd been trapped out in the open, they could have done us damage. My ribs still ached from the hit I'd taken and there was a little scratch along one cheek that was very tender. We had been extremely lucky that the building had been close.

Sara sat down upon the floor and laid her rifle in her lap.

"You all right?" I asked.

"Tired is all," she said. "I suppose there is no reason we can't camp right here."

I looked around and saw that Tuck had gotten off his hobby, but Smith still was sitting in the saddle, bolt upright, as straight as he could sit, with his head held tall and rigid, twisted a little to one side, as if he were listening. On his face he still wore that idiotic, terrifying happiness.

"Tuck," I said, "would you and George unload the hobbies. I'll look around for wood."

We had a campstove with us, but there was no sense in using up the fuel if we could rustle wood. And there is, as well, something to be said in favor of a campfire as a thing to sit around and talk.

"I can't get him down," said Tuck, almost weeping. "He won't listen to me. He won't pay attention."

"What's the matter with him? Was he hit?"

"I don't think so, captain. I think he has finally got where he was headed all the time. I think he has arrived."

"You mean the voice . . ."

"Right here in this building," said Tuck. "At one time it might have been a temple. It has a religious look to it."

From the outside, come to think of it, it had had a churchy look, but you couldn't get much idea of how it looked inside. By the door, with the sunlight slanting from the west, there was plenty of light, but other than that the interior was dark.

"We can't leave him sitting there all night," I said. "We've got to get him down. You and I together can pull him from the saddle."

"Then what?" asked Tuck.

"What do you mean then what?"

"We take him down tonight. What do we do tomorrow?"

"Why, hell," I said, "that's simple. If he doesn't snap out of it, we boost him in the saddle. Tie him on so he can't fall off."

"You mean you'd cart him off again when he finally had arrived? When he had finally reached the place he's been yearning toward for a great part of his life?"

"What are you trying to say?" I yelled. "That we should hunker down and squat right here and never leave because this blubbering idiot . . ."

"I must remind you, captain," Tuck said, nastily, "that it was this blubbering idiot who charted the way for us. If it had not been for him . . ."

"Gentlemen," said Sara, getting to her feet, "please lower your voices. I don't know if you realize it, captain, but we may not be leaving here as soon as you might think."

"Not leaving here," I said, between my teeth. "What is there to stop us?"

She gestured toward the doorway. "Our friend, the tree," she said, "has us zeroed in. I've been watching. All the stuff he's throwing at us is landing on the ramp. There aren't any misses. It would be worth your life to step outside that door. Fast as they are moving and little as they are, those seed-gathering animals are taking casualties."

I saw that the ramp still seemed alive with the bouncing, dancing seeds and here and there upon it lay tiny bodies, limp and motionless.

"The tree will get tired of it," I said. "It will run out of energy or out of ammunition."

She shook her head. "I don't think so, captain. How tall would you say that tree might be? Four miles? Five miles? With foliage from a few hundred feet off the ground to its very top. The spread of the foliage at its widest point close to a mile, perhaps. How many seed pods do you think a tree like that might bear?"

I knew that she was right. She had it figured out. If the tree wanted to, it could keep us pinned down for days.

"Dobbin," I said, "maybe you can tell us what is going on. Why is the tree pegging pods at us?"

"Noble sir," said Dobbin, "nothing will I tell you. I go with you. I carry your possessions. No further will I do. No information will we give and no help. Most shabbily you have treated us and in my heart I cannot find the reason for doing further for you."

Hoot came ambling out of the dark interior of the building, his tentacles waving, the eyes on the end of the two of them shining in the light.

"Mike," he hooted at me, "a curious feel this place has about it. Of old mysteries. Of much time and strangeness. There be something here, a something that falls minutely short of a someone being."

"So you think so, too," I said.

I had another look at Smith. He hadn't moved a muscle. He still sat bolt upright in the saddle and his face still was frozen with that dreadful happiness. The guy was no longer with us. He was a universe away.

"In many ways," said Hoot, "there is a comfort in it, but so strange a comfort that one must quail in fear at the concept of it. I speak, you understand, as an observer only. One such as I can take no part in such a comfort. Much better comfort and refuge can I have if I so desire. But it be information I impart most willingly if it be of service."

"Well," said Sara, "are you two going to get George down off that hobby or do you plan to leave him there?"

"It looks to me," I said, "as if it makes no difference to him if he stays up there or not, but let us get him down."

Tuck and I between us hauled him from the saddle and lugged him across the floor and propped him up against the wall beside the door. He was limp and unresisting and he made no sign to indicate that he was aware of what was going on.

I went over to one of the hobbies and unlashed a pack. Rummaging in it, I found a flashlight.

"Come on, Hoot," I said. "I'm going to scout around and see if I can find some wood. There may be some old furniture or such."

Moving back into the building, I saw that it was not as dark as I had thought at first. It was the contrast of the brightness of the sunlight pouring through the door that had made it seem so dark. But neither was it light. An eerie sort of twilight filled the place like smoke and we moved through it as though we moved through fog.

With Hoot pattering along beside me, we went deeper into the interior of the building. There wasn't much to see. The walls were blocked out by the twilight mist. Here and there objects loomed up darkly. Far overhead a glint of light showed here and there, let in by some chink or window. Off to our right flowed a tide of busy little rat-like creatures harvesting the seeds. I shone the light on them and little red, burning eyes glowed fiercely back at us. I snapped off the light. They gave me the creeps.

Something tapped my arm. I glanced down and saw that Hoot was tapping me with a tentacle. He pointed silently with another one. I looked and saw the heap, a mound of blackness, not neat and rounded, but a little ragged, as if a pile of junk had been thrown into a pile.

"Maybe wood," said Hoot.

We walked toward it and it was larger and farther off than we had thought it was, but we finally reached it and I threw a beam of light upon it. There was wood, all right—broken, shattered sticks and chunks of it, as if someone had smashed up a bunch of furniture and heaved it in a pile. But there was more than wood. There was metal, too, some of it rusted and eroded, but some of it still bright. At one time chunks of metal had been fashioned, apparently into tools or instruments, but they had been bent and twisted out of shape. Someone had done a good

wrecking job, as good a one upon the metal objects as had been done upon the furniture. And there was, as well, what seemed to be hunks of torn cloth and some strangely shaped chunks of wood with fiber tied about them.

"Much rage," said Hoot, "expended upon objects of inanimation. Mystery very deep and logic hard to come by."

I handed him the flashlight and he wrapped a tentacle about it and held it steady so I could see. I knelt and began to pick up wood and load it on one arm, selecting pieces that were campfire length. It was dry and heavy and it should make good fuel and there was a lot of it and we'd not run out of it, no matter how long we might be forced to stay. I picked up one of the strangely shaped pieces with fabric tied about it and, seeing my mistake, was about to throw it to one side when the thought occurred to me that the fiber might serve as tinder, so left it on the load.

I built myself a good armload and rose slowly to my feet. The wood was loaded in the crook of my left arm and I found that I needed my right hand to keep the load from sliding loose.

"You hang onto the light," I said to Hoot. "I need all the arms I have."

He didn't answer and when I looked down at him, I saw that he was rigid. He had stiffened out like a dog pointing at a bird and two of his tentacles were pointed straight up at the ceiling–if the building had a ceiling.

I glanced up and there was nothing there to see, except that I had the feeling I was looking up into a great expanse of space, that the space extended, without interruption, from the floor on which I stood up to the very top of all the spires and turrets.

And out of that extent of space came a whisper that grew in volume–the sound of many wings beating frantically and fast, the same harsh whispering that could be heard when a flock of feeding birds burst from a marshy stretch of ground and beat across the sky. But it was no sudden rush of hurried flight that existed for a moment and then was done with. As we stood listening on the floor below, it kept on and on and on. Somewhere up there in the misty darkness that marked the building's upper structure a great migration seemed to be taking place, with millions of wings beating out of nowhere into nowhere. They–whatever they could have been that had the beating wings–were not

merely circling in that space above our heads. They were flying with a steady, almost frantic, purpose, and for a moment of that flight they crossed those few thousand feet of emptiness that loomed above us and then were gone while others took their place, a steady stream of others, so that the rush of wings was never broken.

I strained my eyes to see them, but there was nothing to be seen. They were too high to see or they were invisible or, I thought, they might not be even there. But the sound was there, a sound that in some other time or place might not be remarkable, but that here was remarkable and, unaccountably, had the freezing impact of the great unknowable.

Then, as suddenly as they had come, the beating wings were gone; the migration ended, and we stood in a silence that was so thick it thundered.

Hoot let down his two pointing tentacles. "Here they were not," he said. "They were otherwhere."

Immediately that he said it, I knew he had been feeling the same thing I'd been sensing, but had not really realized. Those wings—the sound of those wings—had not been in that space where we had heard them, but in some other space, and we had only heard them through some strange spatio-temporal echo. I don't know why I thought that; there was no reason to.

"Let's get back," I said to Hoot. "All of us must be hungry. It's been a long time since we've eaten. Or had any sleep. How about you, Hoot? I never thought to ask. Can you eat the stuff we have?"

"I in my second self," he said. And I recalled what he had said before. In his second self (whatever that might be) he had no need of food.

We went back to the front of the building. The hobbies were standing in a circle, with their heads all pointing inward. The packs had been taken off their backs and were stacked against the wall, close beside the door. Alongside them sat Smith, still slumped, still happy, still out of the world, like an inflated doll that had been tossed against a wall, and beside him was propped the body of Roscoe, the brainless robot. The two of them were ghastly things to see, sitting there together.

The sun had set and outside the doors lay a dusk that was not quite so thick as the dusk inside the building. The ratlike creatures still were pouring out the door and pouring back again, harvesting the seeds.

"The firing has slacked off," said Sara, "but it picks up again as soon as you stick out your head."

"I suppose you did," I said.

She nodded. "There wasn't any danger. I ducked back in again, real fast. I'm a terrible coward when it comes to things like that. But the tree can see us. I am sure it can."

I dumped my armload of wood. Tuck had unpacked some pots and pans and a coffee pot stood ready.

"Just about here?" I asked. "Close to the door so the smoke has a chance of getting out."

Sara nodded. "I'm beat out, captain," she said. "Fire and food will be good for all of us. What about Hoot? Can he . . ."

"He isn't doing any eating or any drinking," I explained. "He's in his second state, but let's not talk about it."

She caught my meaning and nodded.

Tuck came up beside me and squatted down. "That looks to be good wood," he said. "Where did you find it?"

"There's a heap of junk back there. All sorts of stuff."

I squatted down and took out my knife. Picking up one of the smaller sticks, I began to whittle off some shavings. I pushed them in a pile, then reached for the piece of wood that had the fiber tied to it. I was about to rip some of the fiber loose when Tuck put out a hand to stop me.

"Just a second, captain."

He took the piece of wood out of my hands and turned it so that it caught some of the feeble light still coming from the doorway. And now, for the first time, I saw what it was that I had picked up. Until that moment it had been nothing more than a stick of wood with some straw or grass tied to it.

"A doll," said Sara, in surprise.

"Not a doll," said Tuck. His hands were shaking and he was clutching the doll hard, probably in an attempt to keep his hands from shaking. "Not a doll. Not an idol. Look at its face!"

In the twilight the face was surprisingly plain to see. It was barely human. Primate, perhaps, although I couldn't be sure it was even that. But as I looked at it, I felt a sense of shock; human or not, it was an expressive face, and never had I seen a face with so much sadness in it or so much resignation to the sadness. It was no fancy carving. The face, in fact, was crude, it had been simply hacked out of a block of wood. The whole thing had about it the look of a primitive corncob doll. But the

knowing hands that had carved the face, driven by God knows what sadness of their own, had caught within its planes a misery of existence that wrenched one's heart to see.

Tuck slowly raised the doll in both his hands and clutched it tight against his breast. He looked from one to the other of us.

"Don't you see?" he cried at us. "Don't you understand!"

6

Night had fallen. The fire carved a magic circle of light out of the darkness that pressed in all about us. Back of me I could hear the gentle creak as the hobbies rocked gently back and forth. Smith still sprawled limp against the wall. We had tried to rouse him to give him food, but there was no such thing as rousing him. He was simply a sack, still with us in body, but certainly not in mind; his mind was somewhere else. Beside him leaned the metallic body of the mindless robot, Roscoe. And off a little ways sat Tuck with that doll of his clutched tight against his breast, not moving, with his eyes staring out into the darkness.

We were off to a damn poor start, I thought. Already the expedition had started to fall apart.

"Where is Hoot?" asked Sara.

"Off somewhere," I said. "Prowling. He's a restless sort of being. Hadn't you ought to try to get some sleep?"

"And you'll sit up and watch?"

"I'm no Launcelot," I told her, "if that's what you're getting at. You can depend on it–I'll rout you out later on so I can get some sack time."

"In a little while," she said. "Did you happen to notice this place is built of stone?"

"I suppose I had," I said. "I hadn't thought about it."

"Not like the buildings in the city," she said. "This one is made of honest stone. I'm not up on stone. Looks like granite, maybe. You have any idea what the city might be made of?"

"Not stone," I said. "That stuff was never quarried from the ground. Some sort of fabricated material, most likely. Chemical, perhaps. The atoms bonded more tightly than anything we know. Nothing in God's world, more than likely, could pull that stuff apart. When I fired the laser bolt into the landing field, the field wasn't even scorched."

"You know chemistry, captain?"

I shook my head. "Not so you would notice."

"The people who built this building didn't build the city. A more ancient people . . ."

"We can't know that," I said. "There is no way of knowing how long the city's stood. It would take millions of years for it to show any wear or erosion–if it would ever show it."

We sat in silence for a moment. I picked up a stick of wood and poked the sticks in the fire together. The fire blazed up.

"Come morning, captain?" she asked.

"What do you mean come morning?"

"What do we do then?"

"We go on if the tree will let us. We have some footloose centaurs to find, to see if they have a braincase and if we can get the braincase . . ."

She nodded her head in Smith's direction. "What of him?" she asked.

"Maybe he'll come to by then. If not we sling him on a hobby. And if Tuck doesn't snap out of his trance by then, I'll kick him back to life."

"But George was looking for something, too. And he has found what he was looking for."

"Look," I said, "who was it that bought the ship and paid the bill? Who brought Smith to this place? Don't tell me that you are ready to cave in and stop short of what you are looking for because a creep like Smith goes all of a sudden limp on us."

"I don't know," she said. "If it hadn't been for him . . ."

"All right, then," I said. "Let's just leave him here. If that is what he wants. If he's gotten to the place he was aiming for . . ."

"Captain!" she gasped. "You wouldn't do a thing like that!"

"What makes you think I wouldn't?"

"There must be some humanity in you. You wouldn't turn your back . . ."

"He's the one who is turning his back on us. He has what he wants . . ."

"How do you know he has?"

That's the trouble with women. No logic. She had told me that this silly Smith had gotten where he was going. But when I said the same thing, she was set to argue.

"I don't know anything," I said. "Not for certain."

"But you'll go ahead and make decisions."

"Sure," I said. "Because if I don't we could sit here forever. And we're in no situation to be sitting still. We may have a long way to go and we've got to keep on moving."

I got up and walked over to the door and stood there, looking out. There was no moon and the night was dark and there were no stars. The whiteness of the city was distinguishable in the darkness. A hazy and uncertain horizon led off beyond the city. There was nothing else that could be seen.

The tree had stopped its bombing and with all the seeds duly gathered in, the ratlike creatures had gone back to wherever they had come from.

Maybe, I thought, if we sneaked out right now we might be able to make it past the tree. But I somehow doubted it. I didn't think darkness made that much difference to the tree. It certainly didn't see us, for since when did trees have eyes. It must sense us in some other way. It had stopped the bombing, perhaps, because it figured it had us pinned down, knowing that it could start up again if we so much as tried to move, maybe even knowing somehow we'd not be apt to move at night.

But even so the thought of trying for it in the dark had some attraction for me. But we'd be plunging headlong into terrain we knew nothing of, trying to follow a path that we could not see and had never traveled. And, besides, we were too beat out to try it. We needed a good night's rest.

"Why are you here with us, captain?" asked Sara from the fire. "Even from the first you had no belief in the venture."

I went back to the fire and sat down beside her.

"You forget," I said. "All that money that you shoved at me. That's why I'm doing it."

"That's not all of it," she said. "The money would not have been enough. You were afraid you'd never get back into space again. You saw yourself cooped up on Earth forever and even that first day you landed, it was gnawing on you."

"What you really want to know," I said, "is why I had to make the run for Earth, why I sought sanctuary. You're aching to know what sort of criminal you've been traveling with. How come you didn't get all the sordid details? You knew everything else, even to the minute I would land. I'd shake up that intelligence system of yours, if I were you. Your operatives failed."

"There were a lot of stories," she said. "They couldn't all be true. There was no way of telling which one of them was true. But I'll say this much for you—you had space shook up. Tell me, Captain Ross, was it the swindle of all time?"

"I don't know," I said. "I wasn't out to break a record, if that is what you mean."

"But a planet was involved. That is what I heard and it made sense because you were a planet hunter. Was it as good as they said it was?"

"Miss Foster," I said, "it was a beauty. It was the kind of planet Earth was before the Ice Age hit."

"Then what went wrong? There were all sorts of stories. One said there was a virus of some sort. Another said the climate was erratic. One said there wasn't any planet."

I grinned at her. I don't know why I grinned. It was no grinning matter. "There was only one thing wrong," I said. "Such a little thing. It already was inhabited by intelligences."

"But you would have known . . ."

"Not necessarily," I said. "There weren't many of them. And they were hard to spot. What do you look for when you search a planet for intelligence?"

"Why, I don't know," she said.

"Nor do I," I said.

"But you . . ."

"I hunted planets. I did not survey them. No planet hunter is equipped to survey a planet. He can get an idea of what it's like, of course. But he hasn't got the gadgets or the manpower or the savvy to dig deeply into it. A survey made by the man who finds it would have no legal standing. Understandably, there might be certain bias. A planet must be certified . . ."

"But certainly you had it certified. You could not have sold it until it was certified."

I nodded. "A certified survey," I said. "By a reputable surveying firm. It came out completely clean and I was in business. I made just one mistake. I paid a bonus for them to pile in their equipment and their crews and get the job done fast. A dozen realty firms were bidding for the property and I was afraid that someone else might turn up another planet that would be competitive."

"That would have been most unlikely, wouldn't it?"

"Yes, I suppose so. But you must understand that a man could hunt ten lifetimes and never come in smelling distance of a planet half as good. When something like that happens you fall victim to all sorts of fantasies. You wake up sweating at night at the imaginings that build up in your mind. You know you'll never hit again. You know this is your one and only chance to make it really big. You can't bear the thought that something might come along and snatch it all away."

"I think I understand. You were in a hurry."

"You're damned right I was," I said. "And the surveyors were in a hurry, too, so they could earn the bonus. I don't say they were sloppy, but they might have been. But let's be fair with them. The intelligent life forms lived in a rather restricted stretch of jungle and they weren't very bright. A million years ago Earth might have been surveyed and not a single human have turned up. These life forms were on about the same level, let us say, as Pithecanthropus. And Pithecanthropus would not have made a splash in any survey of the Earth at the time he lived. There weren't many of him and, for good reason, he would have stayed out of sight, and he wasn't building anything that you could notice."

"Then it was just a big mistake."

"Yeah," I said. "Just a big mistake."

"Well, wasn't it?"

"Oh, sure. But try to tell that to a million settlers who had moved in almost overnight and had laid out their farms and surveyed their little towns and been given time enough to really appreciate this new world of theirs. Try to tell it to a realty firm with those million settlers howling for their money back and filing damage claims. And there was, of course, the matter of the bonus."

"You mean it was taken for a bribe."

"Miss Foster," I said, "you have hit it exactly on the head."

"But was it? Was it a bribe, I mean?"

"I don't know," I told her. "I don't think so. I'm fairly sure that when I offered it and, later, paid it, I didn't think of it as a bribe. It was simply a bonus to do a good job fast. Although I suppose, unconsciously, that the company might have been disposed to do a little better for me than they would have done for someone else who didn't pay a bonus, that they might even be inclined to shut their eyes to a thing or two."

"But you banked your money on Earth. In a numbered account. You'd been doing that for years. That doesn't sound too honest."

"That's nothing," I said, "that a man can be hanged for. With a lot of operators out in space it's just standard operating procedure. It's the only planet that allows numbered accounts and Earth's banking setup is the safest one there is. A draft on Earth is honored anywhere, which is more than you can say for many of the other planets."

She smiled at me across the fire. "I don't know," she said. "There are so many things I like about you, so many things I hate. What are you going to do with George when we're able to leave?"

"If he continues the way he is," I said, "we may bury him. He can't go on living too long without food or water. And I'm not an expert on force feeding. Perhaps you are."

She shook her head a little angrily. "What about the ship?" she asked, changing the subject.

"Well, what about it?"

"Maybe, instead of leaving the city, we should have gone back to the field."

"To do what? To bang a little on the hull? Try to bust it open with a sledge? And who has got a sledge?"

"We'll need it later on."

"Maybe," I said. "Maybe not. We may know more then. Pick up an angle, maybe. Don't you think that if a ship, once covered by that goo, could be cracked open by main force and awkwardness someone else would have done it long ago?"

"Maybe they have. Maybe someone cracked their ship and took off. How can you know they haven't?"

"I can't, of course. But if this vibration business is true, the city is no place to hang around."

"So we're going off without even trying to get into the ship?"

"Miss Foster," I said, "we're finally on the trail of Lawrence Arlen Knight. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes, of course. But the ship . . ."

"Make up your mind," I said. "Just what in hell do you want to do?"

She looked at me levelly. "Find Knight," she said.

7

Just before dawn she shook me awake.

"George is gone!" she shouted at me. "He was there just a minute ago. Then when I looked again, he wasn't there."

I came to my feet. I was still half asleep, but there was an alarming urgency in her voice and I forced myself into something like alertness.

The place was dark. She had let the fire burn low and the light from it extended out for only a little distance. George was gone. The place where he had been propped against the wall was empty. The shell of Roscoe still leaned grotesquely and a heap of supplies were piled to one side.

"Maybe he woke up," I said, "and had to go . . ."

"No," she screamed at me. "You forget. The man is blind. He'd called for Tuck to lead him. And he didn't call. He didn't move, either. I would have heard him. I was sitting right here, by the fire, looking toward the door. It had been only a moment before that I had looked at George and he was there and when I looked back he wasn't and . . ."

"Now, just a second," I said. There was hysteria in her voice and I was afraid that if she went on, she'd become more and more unstuck. "Let's just hold up a minute. Where is Tuck?"

"He's over there. Asleep." She pointed and I saw the huddle of the man at the firelight's edge. Beyond him were the humped shapes of the hobbies. They probably weren't sleeping, I told myself, rather stupidly; they undoubtedly never slept. They just stood there, watching.

There was no sign of Hoot.

What she had said was right. If Smith had wakened from his coma and had wanted something—a drink of water or to go to the can or something of the sort—he'd have done nothing by himself. He would have set up a squall for Tuck, his ever-watchful, ever-loving Tuck. And she would have heard him if he'd made any movement, for the place was silent with that booming quietness that fills an empty building when everyone had left. A dropped pin, the scratching of a match, the hiss and rustle of clothing rubbing against stone—any of these could have been heard with alarming clarity.

"All right, then," I said. "He's gone. You didn't hear him. He didn't call for Tuck. We'll look for him. We'll keep our heads. We won't go charging off."

I felt cold and all knotted up. I didn't give a damn for Smith. If he were gone, all right; if we never found him that would be all right, too. He was a goddamned nuisance. But I still was cold with a terrible kind of cold, a cold that began inside of me and worked out to the surface, and I found myself holding myself tight and rigid so I wouldn't shiver with the cold.

"I'm frightened, Mike," she said.

I stepped away from the fire and walked the few strides to where Tuck lay sleeping.

Bending over him, I saw that he slept like no honest man. He was curled up in a fetal position, with his brown robe wrapped snugly about him and in the huddling place formed by his knees and chest, and with his arms clutching it, was that silly doll. Sleeping with the thing like a three-year-old might sleep with a Teddy Bear or a Raggedy Ann in the fenced-in security of the crib.

I put out my hand to shake him, then hesitated. It seemed a shame to wake that huddled thing, safe in the depths of sleep, to the nightmare coldness of this emptied building on an alien planet that made no sort of sense.

Behind me Sara asked, "What's the matter, captain?"

"Not a thing," I said.

I gripped Tuck's scrawny shoulder and shook him awake.

He came up out of sleep drugged and slow. With one hand he rubbed at his eyes, with the other he clutched that hideous doll more closely to him.

"Smith is gone," I said. "We'll have to hunt for him."

He sat up slowly. He still was rubbing at his eyes. He didn't seem to understand what I had told him.

"Don't you understand?" I asked. "Smith is gone."

He shook his head. "I don't think that he is gone," he said. "I think he has been taken."

"Taken!" I yelled. "Who the hell would take him? What would want him?"

He looked at me, a condescending look for which I gladly could have strangled him. "You don't understand," he said. "You have never understood. You'll never understand. You don't feel it, do you? With it all around us, you don't feel a thing. You're too crass and materialistic. Brute force and bombast are the only things that mean anything to you. Even here . . ."

I grabbed his robe and twisted it to pull it tight around him and then rose to my feet, dragging him along with me. The doll fell from his grasp as he raised his hands to try to loosen my hold upon the robe. I kicked it to one side, clattering, out into the darkness.

"Now," I yelled, "what is all of this? What is going on that I don't see or feel, that I don't understand?"

I shook him so hard that his hands flopped away and hung down at his side; his head bobbed back and forth and his teeth chattered.

Sara was at my side, tugging at my arm.

"Leave him alone," she screamed at me.

I let loose of him and he staggered a bit before he got his feet well under him.

"What did he do?" Sara demanded. "What did he say to you?"

"You heard," I said. "You must have heard. He said Smith had been taken. Taken by what is what I want to know. Taken where? And why?"

"So would I," said Sara.

And, so help me, for once she was on my side. And just a while before she had called me Mike instead of captain.

He backed away from us, whimpering. Then suddenly he made a break, scuttling out into the darkness.

"Hey, there!" I shouted, starting after him.

But before I could reach him, he stopped and stooped, scooping up that ridiculous doll of his.

I turned about, disgusted, and went stalking back to the fire. I took a stick of wood off the stack of fuel and pushed the burning embers

together, found three or four small sticks of wood and laid them upon the coals. Flames immediately began to lick up about them.

Squatting by the fire, I watched Sara and Tuck walking back toward me. I waited for them to come up and stayed there, squatting, looking up at them.

They stopped and stood there, looking at me. Finally Sara spoke.

"Are we going to look for George?"

"Where do we look?" I asked.

"Why, here," she said, with a wave of her arm indicating the dark interior of the building.

"You didn't hear him leave," I said. "You saw him, just as he had been all night, then a moment later when you looked back, he wasn't there. You didn't hear him move. If he had moved, you would have heard him. He couldn't just get up and tiptoe away. He didn't have the time to do it and he was blind and he couldn't have known where he was. If he had wakened, he would have been confused and called out."

I said to Tuck, "What do you know about this? What was it you tried to tell me?"

He shook his head, like a sulky child.

"You must believe me," Sara said. "I didn't go to sleep. I didn't doze. After you woke me to get some sleep yourself, I kept faithful watch. It was exactly as I told you."

"I believe you," I said. "I never doubted you. That leaves it up to Tuck. If he knows something, let us hear it now before we go rushing off."

Neither Sara nor I said a word. We waited for him and finally he spoke. "You know about the voice. The voice of the person George thought of as a friend. And here he found his friend. Right here. In this very place."

"And you think," I said, "he was taken by this friend of his?"

Tuck nodded. "I don't know how," he said, "but I hope that I am right. George deserved it. He had something good coming after all the years. You never liked him. There were a lot of people who never liked him. He grated on them. But he had a beautiful soul. He was a gentle sort of person."

Christ, yes, I thought, a gentle sort of person. Lord save me from all these gentle, whining people.

Sara said to me, "You buy any of this, captain?"

"I don't know," I said. "Something happened to him. I don't know if

this is it. He didn't walk away. He didn't make it under his own power."

"Who is this friend of his?" asked Sara.

"Not a who," I said. "A what."

And, squatting there by the fire, I remembered the rush of beating wings I'd heard, flying through the upper darkness of this great abandoned building.

"There is something here," said Tuck. "Certainly you must feel it."

Faintly out of the darkness came a sound of ticking, a regular, orderly, rapid ticking that grew louder, seeming to draw closer. We faced around into the darkness from which the ticking came, Sara with the rifle at the ready, Tuck clutching the doll desperately against him, as if it might be some sort of fetish that would protect him from all harm.

I saw the shape that went with the ticking before the others did.

"Don't shoot!" I yelled. "It's Hoot."

He came toward us, his many little feet twinkling in the firelight, ticking on the floor. He stopped when he saw all of us facing him, then came slowly in.

"Informed I am," he said. "I knew him go and hurried back."

"You what?" I yelled.

"Your friend is go. He disappear from sense."

"You mean you knew the instant he was gone? How could you?"

"All of you," he said, "I carry in my mind. Even when I cannot see. And one is gone from out my mind and I think great tragedy, so I hurry back."

"You say you heard him go," said Sara. "You mean just now?"

"Just short ago," said Hoot.

"Can you tell us where? Do you know what happened to him?"

Hoot waved a tentacle wearily. "Cannot tell. Only know is gone. No use to seek for him."

"You mean he isn't here. Not in this building?"

"Not this edifice," said Hoot. "Not outside. Not on this planet, maybe. He is gone entire."

Sara glanced at me. I shrugged.

Tuck said, "Why is it so hard for you to believe a fact that you can't touch or see? Why must all mysteries have possible solutions? Why must you think only in terms of physical laws? Is there no room outside your little minds for something more than that?"

I should have clobbered him, I suppose, but right at that moment it didn't seem important to pay attention to a pipsqueak such as him.

I said to Sara, "We can look. I don't think we'll find him, but we still could have a look."

"I'd feel better if we did," she said. "It doesn't seem quite right not to even try."

"You disbelieve this thing I tell you?" Hoot inquired.

"I don't think we do," I said. "What you say most undoubtedly is true. But there is a certain loyalty in our race—it's a hard thing to explain. Even when we know there is no hope, we still go out to look. It's not logical, perhaps."

"No logic," said Hoot, "assuredly and yet a ragged sense and admirable. I go and help you look."

"There is no need to, Hoot."

"You withhold me from sharing of your loyalty?"

"Oh, all right, then. Come along."

Sara said, "I'm going with you."

"No, you're not," I said. "We need someone to watch the camp."

"There is Tuck," she said.

"You should know very well, Miss Foster," Tuck said, petulantly, "that he would not trust me to watch anything at all. Besides, it all is foolishness. What this creature says is true. You won't find George, no matter where you look."

8

We had gone only a short distance into the interior of the building when Hoot said to me, "I came to carry news, but I did not divulge it, its import seeming trivial with the lamented absence of your companion. But perhaps you hear it now."

"Go ahead," I said.

"It concerns the seeds," said Hoot. "To this feeble intellect, great mystery is attached."

"For the love of Christ," I said, "quit talking around in circles."

"I improve upon mere talk," said Hoot. "I point it out to you. Please veer slightly with me."

He started off at an angle and I veered slightly with him and we came to a heavy metal grating set into the floor. He pointed at it sternly with a tentacle. "Seeds down there," he said.

"Well, what about it?"

"Please observe," he said. "Illuminate the pit."

I got down on my hands and knees and shone the flashlight down into the pit, bending down to see between the gratings until my face was pressed against the metal.

The pit seemed huge. The beam of light did not reach the walls. Underneath the grating, seeds lay in a massive heap—many more of them, I was certain, than the ratlike creatures had carried in the day before.

I looked for something that might explain the great importance Hoot attached to the pit, but I failed to find anything.

I got up and flicked out the light. "I don't see anything too strange," I told him. "It's a cache of food. That is all it is. The rats carry the seeds and drop them through the grating . . ."

"Is no cache of food," Hoot contradicted me. "Is cache of permanent. I look. I stick my looker down into the space between the bars. I wiggle it around. I survey the well. I see that space is tight enclosed. Once seeds get in no way to get them out."

"But it is dark down there."

"Dark to you. Not dark to me. Can adjust the seeing. Can see to all sides of space. Can see through seeds to bottom. Can do more than simple see. Can explore surface closely. No opening. No opening even closed. No way to get them out. Our little harvesters harvest seeds, but for something else."

I had another look and there were tons of seeds down there.

"Is not only storage place," Hoot grated at me. "There be several others."

"What else?" I asked, irritated. "How many other things have you turned up?"

"Is piles of worn-out commodities such as one from which you

obtained the wood," he said. "Is marks upon the floor and walls where furnishings uprooted. Is place of reverence . . ."

"You mean an altar?"

"I know not of altar," he said. "Place of reverence. Smell of holy. And there be a door. It leads into the back."

"Into the back of what?"

"Into outdoors," he said.

I yelled at him, "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I tell you now," he said. "I hesitate before in respect of missing person."

"Let's have a look at it."

"But," said Hoot, "first we search most carefully for lost comrade. We comb, however hopelessly . . ."

"Hoot."

"Yes, Mike."

"You said he isn't here. You are sure he isn't here."

"Sure, of course," he said. "Still we look for him."

"No, we don't," I said. "Your word is good enough for me."

He could see into a darkened bin and know that it was closed. He could do more than see. He didn't merely see; he knew. He carried each of us in his mind and one of us was gone. And that was good enough. When he said Smith wasn't here, I was more than willing to agree he wasn't.

"I know not," said Hoot. "I would not have you . . ."

"I do," I said. "Let us find that door."

He turned about and went pattering off into the darkness and, adjusting the rifle on my shoulder, I followed close behind him. We were walking through an emptiness that boomed back at us at the slightest sound. I looked over my shoulder and saw the tiny gash of light that was the open door in front. It seemed to me that I caught a glimpse of someone moving at the edge of it, but could not be sure.

We went on into the emptiness and behind us the sliver of light grew smaller, while above us it seemed that I could feel the very presence of the looming space that went up to the roof. Finally Hoot stopped. I had not seen the wall, but it was there, just a few feet ahead of us. A thin crack of light appeared and grew wider. Hoot was pushing on the door, opening it. It was small. Less than two feet wide and so low that I had to stoop to get through it.

The red and yellow landscape stretched away before me. To either

side the dark-red stone of the building made a fence. There were other trees, far off, but I could not see the tree that had been shooting at us. It was blocked off by the structure.

"Can we get that door open again if we go out?" I asked.

Still holding it open, Hoot sidled around and had a look at its outside panel. "Undoubted not," he said. "Constructed only to be opened from inside."

I hunted for a small boulder, kicked it out of the ground and rolled it over to the door, wedging it tightly so the door would stay open.

"Come along," I said. "We'll have a look. But be sure to stay behind me."

I headed to my left, walking along the wall. I reached the corner of the building and peered out. The tree was there.

It saw me or sensed me or somehow became aware of me the second I poked my head around the corner, and started shooting. Black dots detached themselves from it and came hurtling toward me, ballooning rapidly as they came.

"Down!" I yelled to Hoot. "Get down!"

I threw myself backwards and against the wall, huddled over the crouching Hoot, burying my face in my folded arms. Out beyond me the seed pods thudded. Some of them apparently struck against the corner of the building. The seeds went whizzing, with dull whistling sounds. One struck me on the shoulder and another took me in the ribs and they did no damage but they stung like fury. Others slammed against the wall above us and went ricocheting off, howling as they spun.

The first burst ended and I half stood up. Before I got straightened, the second burst came in and I threw myself on top of Hoot again. None of the seeds hit me solidly this time, but one grazed the back of my neck and it burned like fire.

"Hoot," I yelled, "how fast can you run?"

"Scramble very rapidly," he said, "when materials at me are being hurled."

"Then listen."

"I hearken most attentively," said Hoot.

"It's firing in bursts. When the next burst ends, when I yell, try to make it to the door. Keep close to the wall. Keep low. Are you headed in the right direction?"

"In wrong direction," said Hoot. "I turn myself around."

He twisted underneath me.

Another salvo came in. Seeds peppered all around me. One nicked me in the leg.

"Wait," I said to Hoot. "When you get in tell Miss Foster to get the packs on those hobbies and get them moving. We're getting out of here."

Another burst of pods came storming in on us. The seeds rattled on the walls and skipped along the ground. One threw a spray of sand into my face, but this time none hit me.

"Now!" I yelled. Bent low, I raced for the corner, the rifle in my hand, the intensity lever pushed to its final notch. A blizzard of seeds caught me. One banged me on the jaw, another caught me in the shin. I staggered and half went down, then caught myself and went plowing on. I wondered how Hoot was doing, but didn't have the time to look.

Then I was at the corner of the building and there was the tree, perhaps three miles away—it was hard to judge the distance.

I brought the rifle to my shoulder. What looked like black gnats were swarming from the tree, coming at me, but I took my time. I got my sight and then I pressed the trigger and twitched the rifle downward, sidewise in a slicing motion. The laser beam blinked for a moment, then was gone, and in that instant before the seeds struck, I threw myself flat upon the ground, trying to hold the rifle high so it didn't absorb the full impact of the fall.

A million fists were hammering at my head and shoulders and I knew what had happened—some of the pods had struck the corner of the building and exploded, showering me with seeds.

I struggled to my knees and looked toward the tree. It seemed to be reeling and, as I watched, began to topple. I wiped the dust out of my eyes and watched as it came farther and farther out of plumb. It fell slowly at first, reluctantly, as if it were fighting to stay erect. Then it picked up speed, coming down out of the sky, rushing toward the ground.

I got to my feet and wiped the back of my neck, and the hand, when it came away, was bloody.

The tree hit the ground and beneath me the earth bounced, as if it had been struck a mighty blow. Above the place where the tree had fallen a geyser of dust and other debris billowed up into the sky.

I took a step to get turned around, headed back toward the door, and stumbled. My head ballooned and as it ballooned, was filled with fuzziness. I saw that Hoot stood to one side of the open door, but that the way through it was blocked by a perfect flood of the ratlike creatures. They were piling up over one another, as if a wide front of them, running hard, had converged upon the narrowness of the door and now were funneling through it like water through a high-pressure hose, driven on by the press of their frantic need to gather up the fallen seeds.

I fell—no, I floated—down through an eternity of time and space. I knew that I was falling, but not only was I falling slowly, but as I fell the ground seemed to draw away from me, to surge downward, so that no matter how I fell it always was as far away, or farther, than it had been to start with. And finally there was no ground at all, for night had fallen as I fell, and now I was plunging down through an awful blackness that went on and on forever.

After what seemed an endless time, the darkness went away and I opened my eyes, for it seemed that I had closed them as I fell into the darkness. I lay upon the ground and when I opened my eyes I found that I was looking up into a deep-blue sky in which the sun was rising.

Hoot was standing to one side of me. The ratlike things were gone. The cloud of dust, slowly settling back to the ground, still stood above where the tree had fallen. To one side of me the red stone wall of the great building reared up into the sky. A heavy, brooding silence hung above the land.

I rose to a sitting position and found that it took all the strength I had to lever up the top half of my body. The rifle lay to one side of me and I reached out and picked it up. It took no more than a single glance to see that it was broken. The shield of the tube was twisted out of shape and the tube itself had been knocked out of alignment. I dragged it to me and laid it across my lap. I don't know why I bothered; no man in his right mind would ever dare to fire that gun again and there was no way I could fix it.

"Drink your fluids I have done," Hoot honked cheerfully, "and put them back again. I hope you have no anger at me."

"Come again?" I croaked.

"No need to come again," he hooted at me. "Done it is already."

"What is done already?"

"Your fluids I have drunk . . ."

"Now wait just a goddamn minute," I said. "What is this fluid drinking?"

"Filled you were with deadly substances," he said, "from being struck by seeds. Deadly to you, but deadly not at all to me."

"So you drank my fluids?"

"Is only thing to do," said Hoot. "Procedure is approved."

"Lord love us," I said. "A walking, breathing dialysis contraption."

"Your words I do not grab," he complained. "I empty you of fluids. I subtract the substances. I fill you up again. The biologic pump you have inside you scarcely missed a pump. But worry worry worry! I think I was too late. Apparent now I wasn't."

I sat there for a long moment—for a long, long moment—and it was impossible. And yet I was alive, weak and drained of strength, but still alive. I thought back to how my head had ballooned and how I'd fallen slowly and there had been something very wrong with me, indeed. I had been hit by seeds before, but only glancing blows that had not broken skin. This time, however, there had been blood upon my hand when I had wiped my neck.

"Hoot," I said, "I guess I owe . . ."

"No debt for you," he hooted happily. "I the one who pay the debt. My life you saved before. Now I pay you back. We all even now. I would not tell you only that I fear great sin I had committed, maybe. Perhaps against some belief you hold. Perhaps no wish to have body tampered with. No need to tell you only for this reason. But you undismayed at what I do, so everything all right."

I managed to get to my feet. The rifle fell from my lap and I kicked it to one side. The kick almost put me on my face again. I still was wobbly.

Hoot watched me brightly with his eyed tentacles.

"You carry me before," he said. "I cannot carry you. But if you lie down and fasten yourself securely to my body, I can drag you. Have much power in legs."

I waved the suggestion off.

"Get on with you," I said. "Lead the way. I'll make it."

9

Tuck tried to play the man. He and Sara got me hoisted up on Dobbin's back and then he insisted that Sara ride the second unladen hobby and that he lead the way on foot. So we went down the ramp and up the trail, with Tuck striding in the fore, still with the doll clutched against his chest, and with Hoot bringing up the rear.

"I hope," Dobbin said to me, "you have failure to survive. I yet will dance upon your bones."

"And the same to you," I said.

It wasn't a very brilliant answer, but I wasn't at my best. I still was fairly shaky and it was about all that I could do to hang onto the saddle.

The trail led up a short rise and when we reached the top of it, we could see the tree. It was several miles away and it was bigger, even at that distance, than I had imagined it would be. It had fallen squarely across the trail and the impact of its fall had shattered the trunk from its butt up almost half its length, as any hollow tree might shatter when it falls victim to the axe. Pouring out of the great rents in the wood were crawling, creeping things, gray and even from that distance, with a slimy look to them. There were great piles of them heaped along the fallen trunk and more were crawling out and others of them were crawling down the trail, humping in their haste. From them came a thin and reedy wailing that set my teeth on edge.

Dobbin rocked nervously and whinnied in what might have been disgust or fright. "This you will regret," he shrilled at me. "No other things have ever dared to put hands upon a tree. Never in all time have the tenants of the tree been loosed upon the land."

"Buster," I told him, "the tree drew a bead on me. There don't nothing shoot at me that I don't shoot back."

"We'll have to go around," said Sara.

Tuck looked up at us. "Around that way is shorter," he said. He swept his arm toward the left, where the stump of the tree still stood, sliced diagonally by the laser beam.

Sara nodded. "Go ahead," she said.

Tuck stepped off the trail and the hobbies followed. The ground was rough, strewn with rounded stones the size of a person's head, studded with small, ground-hugging plants armed with heavy thorns. The ground itself was sand, interspersed with a reddish clay and mixed in both the sand and clay were shattered chips of stone, as if throughout millions of years busy little creatures had beaten rocks with hammers to reduce their mass to shards.

As soon as we moved off the trail to begin our detour around the tree, the heaving mass of gray and slimy creatures moved out convulsively in their humping, hitching motion, to cut us off. They moved in a mass, a flowing sheet of motion with many tiny bobbing eddies, so that the entire group of them seemed to be in constant agitation. They looked very much, I thought, like an expanse of choppy water.

Tuck, seeing them move to cut us off, increased his pace until he was almost galloping, but stumbling and falling as he galloped, for the ground was most uneven and treacherous to the feet. Falling, he bumped his legs and knees against the rounded stones and his outstretched hands, flung out against the falls, smashed into the thorn-bearing vegetation that flowed along the ground. He dropped the doll and stopped to pick it up and blood from his thorn-torn fingers ran into the fabric.

The hobbies increased their pace as well, but slowed or came to a halt each time that Tuck, his legs entangled in his robe, came crashing down.

"We'll never make it," Sara said, "with him out there floundering around. I'm going to get down."

"No, you're not," I said.

I tried to vault out of the saddle and I did get out of it, but it was an awkward operation and could by no stretch of imagination have been called a vault. I landed on my feet, but it was only by the utmost effort that I kept from falling on my face, right into a patch of the prickly vegetation. I managed to stay upright and ran ahead and grabbed Tuck by the shoulder.

"Get back and climb up on Dobbin," I panted. "I'll take it from here on."

He swung around on me and there were tears of anger in his eyes. His face was all squeezed up and there was no question that he hated me.

"You never let me have a chance!" he screamed. "You never let anyone have a chance. You grab it all yourself."

"Get back there and get on that hobby," I told him. "If you don't, I'll clobber you."

I didn't wait to see what he did, but went on ahead, picking my way as best I could over the difficult terrain, trying only to hurry, not to run, as had been the case with Tuck.

My legs were wobbly and I had a terrible, unhinged sense of emptiness in my gut; my head had a tendency to float lazily upward and take on a spin.

During all of this, the wobbly legs, the empty gut, the floating head, I still managed to keep plunging ahead at a fairly steady pace and at the same time stay aware of the progress of that flowing blanket of gray sliminess that poured out from the fallen tree.

It was moving almost as fast as we were moving and it was proceeding on what a military man probably would have called an interior line and I could see that no matter what we did we couldn't quite escape it. We would brush against the outer edge of it; the creatures in the forefront of the mass would reach us, but we'd escape the main body of them.

The keening of the creatures, as the distance between us lessened, became sharper—an unending wail, like the crying of lost souls.

I looked back over my shoulder and the others were coming on, very close behind me. I tried to speed up a bit and almost came a cropper, so settled down to covering ground as rapidly as I could with safety.

We could swing a little wider on the detour, and have had a chance of outdistancing the wailing horde that humped across the land. But the chance was not a sure one and would lose a lot of time. As we were going, we would just graze the outer edge of them.

There was no way, of course, to figure out beforehand what danger they might pose. If they should prove too dangerous, we could always run for it. If the laser rifle had not been broken, we could have handled almost any danger, but the ballistics weapon Sara carried was all that we had left.

For a moment I thought that after all we would reach our point of intersection before they had arrived, that we would move on past them

and be on our way and free of them. But I miscalculated and they came rolling up on us, the edge of that great humping carpet of them hitting us broadside as we crossed their front.

They were small, not more than a foot or so in height and they looked like naked snails except that instead of snail faces they had a parody of human faces—the kind of ridiculous, vacant, pitifully staring faces that can be found upon certain cartoon characters, and now their keening wails turned into words—not into the actual sound of words, perhaps, but inside one's head that sound of wailing turned into words and you knew what they were crying. Not all of them were crying the same thing, but crying about the same thing and it was horrible.

Homeless, they cried in their many tongues. You have made us homeless. You have destroyed our home and now we have no home and what will become of us? We are lost. We are naked. We are hungry. We will die. We know no other place. We want no other place. We wanted so little and we needed so little and now you have taken that very little from us. What right did you have to take that very little from us—you who have so much? What kind of creatures are you, that you fling us out into a world we do not want and cannot know and cannot even live in? You need not answer us, of course. But there will be a time when an answer will be asked of you and what will be your answer?

It wasn't that way, of course, not all of it flowing together, not connected, not a definitive statement, not a structured question. But in the bits and pieces of the crying that hammered in on us that is what it meant, that is what those slimy, humping, bereft creatures meant to say to us—knowing, I think, that there was nothing we could do for them or would be willing to do for them, but wanting us to realize the full enormity of what we'd done to them. And it was not only the words that were carried in their crying, but the look of those thousands of pathetic faces that hurled the cries at us—the anguish and the lostness, the hopelessness and the pity, yes, the very pity that they felt for us who were so vile and so abandoned and so vicious that we could take their home from them. And of all of it, the pity was the worst to take.

We won our way free of them and went on and behind us their wailing faded and finally dropped to silence, either because we were too far away to hear it or because they had stopped the wailing, knowing there was no longer any purpose to it, knowing, perhaps, that there had never been a purpose to it, but still constrained to cry out their complaint.

But even with the wailing no longer heard, the words beat in my brain and the knowledge grew and grew and grew that by the simple act of pressing a trigger I had killed not only a tree, but the thousands of pitiful little creatures that had made the tree their home and I found myself, illogically, equating them with the fairies which, in my boyhood, I'd been told lived in an ancient and majestic tree which grew behind the house, although these wailing things, God knows, looked not in the least like fairies.

Dull anger rose inside me to counterweigh the guilt and I found myself trying to justify the felling of the tree and that part of it was easy, for it could be stated and set forth in very simple terms. The tree had tried to kill me and would have killed me if it had not been for Hoot. The tree had tried to kill me and I had killed it instead and that was as close to basic justice as anyone could come. But would I have killed it, I asked myself, if I had known that it had been the home of all the wailing creatures? I tried to tell myself that I might not have acted as I had if I had only known. But it was no use. I recognized a lie even when I told it to myself. I had to admit that I would have acted exactly as I did even if I'd known.

A sharp ridge rose up ahead of us and we began to climb it. As we started up it the sharpened upper edge of the tree stump barely showed above the ridge, but as we climbed more and more of the massive stump came into view. At the time I had used the laser I had been facing north and had aimed at the tree's western face, then had raked the laser down, cutting the stump on a sharp diagonal, making the tree fall eastward. If I had used my head, I told myself, I could have started on the eastern edge and made the tree fall to the west. That way it would not have blocked the trail. It beat all hell, I told myself, how a man never thinks of a better way to do a thing until he'd already done it.

Finally we reached the ridgetop and from where we stood looked down upon the stump, the first time we had really seen it in its entirety. And the stump was just a stump, although a big one, but in a neatly drawn circle about it was a carpeting of green. A mile or more in diameter, it stretched out from the stump, an oasis of green-lawn neatness set in the middle of a red and yellow wilderness.

It made one ache to look at it, it looked so much like home, so much like the meticulously cared-for lawns that the human race had carried with it and had cultivated or had tried to cultivate on every planet where they had settled down. I'd never thought of it before, but now I

thought about it, wondering what it was about the trimmed neatness of a greensward that made the humanoids of Earth carry the concept of it deep into outer space when they left so much else behind.

The hobbies spread out in a thin line on the ridgetop and Hoot came scrambling up the slope to stand beside me.

"What is it, captain?" Sara asked.

"I don't know," I said.

And that was strange, I thought. For I could have said it was a lawn and let it go at that. But there was something about it that told me, instinctively, that it was no simple lawn.

Looking at it, a man wanted to walk down to it and stretch out full length upon it, putting his hands behind his head, tilting his hat over his eyes, and settle down for an easy afternoon. Even with the tree no longer standing to provide the shade, it would have been a pleasant spot to take a midday nap.

That was the trouble with it. It looked too inviting and too cool, too familiar.

"Let's move on," I said.

Swinging a little to the left to give the circular patch of green plenty of room, I set off down the ridge. As I walked I kept a weather eye cocked to the right and nothing happened, absolutely nothing. I was prepared to have some great and fearsome shape burst upward from that expanse of sward and come charging out at us. I imagined that the grass might roll up like a rug and reveal an infernal pit out of which horrors would come pouncing.

But the lawn continued to be a lawn. The massive stump speared up into the sky and just beyond it lay the mighty bulk of the shattered trunk—the ruined home of the humping little shapes that had cried out their anguish to us.

Ahead of us lay the trail, a slender, dusty thread that wound out into the tortured landscape, leading into a dim unknown. And looming over the horizon other massive trees that towered into the sky.

I found that I was tottering on my feet. Now that we were past the tree and swinging back onto the trail, the nervous tension that had held me together was swiftly running out. I set myself the task of first one foot, then the other, fighting to stay erect, mentally measuring the slowly decreasing distance until we should reach the trail.

We finally did reach it and I set down on a boulder and let myself come unstuck.

The hobbies stopped, spread out in a line, and I saw that Tuck was looking down at me with a look of hatred that seemed distinctly out of place. There he sat atop Dobbin, a scarecrow tricked out in a ragged robe of brown and with that ridiculous doll-like artifact clutched against his chest. He looked like a sulky, overgrown girl, but with a strange wistfulness about him, if you left out his face. If he'd stuck his thumb into his mouth and settled down to sucking it, the picture would have been entirely rounded out. But the face was the trouble, the impression of the ragged little girl stopped when you saw that hatchet face, almost as brown as the robe he wore, the great, pool-like eyes glazed with the hatred in them.

"You are, I presume," he said, with his rat-trap mouth biting off the words, "quite proud of yourself."

"I don't understand you, Tuck," I said. And that was the solemn truth; I didn't understand what he had in mind with that sort of talk. I had never understood the man and I supposed I never would.

He gestured with his hand, back toward the cut-down tree.

"That," he said.

"I suppose you think I should have left it there, taking shots at us."

I had no yen to argue with him; I was too beat out. And it was beyond me why he should be up in arms about the tree. Hell, it had been taking shots at him as well as the rest of us.

"You destroyed all those creatures," he said. "The ones living in the tree. Think of it, captain! What a magnificent achievement! A whole community wiped out!"

"I didn't know about them," I said. I could have added that even if I had, it would have made no difference. But I didn't say it.

"Well," he demanded, "have you nothing more to say about it?"

I shrugged. "It's their tough luck," I said.

Sara said, "Lay off him, Tuck. How could he have known?"

"He pushes everyone," said Tuck. "He pushes everyone around."

"Most of all himself," said Sara. "He didn't push you, Tuck, when he took your place. You were fumbling around."

"A man can't take on a planet," Tuck declared. "He has to go along with it. He has to adapt. He can't bull his way through."

I was ready to let it go at that. He had done his grousing. He'd got it off his chest. He had had his say. It must have been humiliating, even for a jerk like Tuck, when I took over from him and he had something coming. He had a right to take it out on me if it helped him any.

I struggled off the boulder to my feet.

"Tuck," I said, "I wonder if you'll take over now. I need to ride a while."

He got down off Dobbin and as I moved up to mount we came face to face. The hatred still was there, a more terrible hatred, it seemed to me, than had been in his face before. His thin lips scarcely moved and he said, almost in a whisper, "I'll outlast you, Ross. I'll be alive when you're long dead. This planet will give you what you've been asking for all your entire life."

I didn't have too much strength left, but I had enough to grab him by an arm and fling him out, sprawling, into the dusty trail. He dropped the doll and groveled, on his hands and knees, picking it up.

I hung onto the saddle to keep from falling down.

"Now lead out," I told him. "And, so help me Christ, you do one more stupid thing and I'll get down and beat you to a pulp."

10

The trail wound across the arid land, crossing flats of sand and little pools of cracked, dried mud where weeks or months, or maybe even years before, rainwater had collected. It climbed broken, shattered ridges, angling around grotesque land formations. It wended its way around dome-shaped buttes. The land stayed red and yellow and sometimes black where ledges of glassy volcanic stone cropped out. Far ahead, sometimes seen, sometimes fading in the horizon blueness, lay a smudge of purple that I thought were mountains, but could not be sure.

The vegetation continued sparse–little bushes that crouched close against the ground, the sprawling thorn that ran along the surface. The

sun blazed down out of a cloudless sky, but it was not hot, just pleasantly warm. The sun, I was sure, was smaller and fainter than the sun of Earth—either that, or the planet lay a greater distance from it.

On some of the higher ridges were little, cone-shaped houses of stone, or at least structures that looked like houses. As if someone or something had needed temporary shelter or protection and had gathered up flat slabs of stone, which lay about the ridges, and had constructed a flimsy barrier. The stones were laid up dry, with no mortar, piled one atop another. Some of the structures still stood much as their builders must have left them, in many of the others stones had fallen out of place, and in still others the entire structure had collapsed and lay in fallen heaps.

And there were the trees. They loomed in all directions, each one standing alone and lordly in its loneliness and each of them several miles from any other. We came close to none of them.

There was no life, or none that showed itself. The land ran on and on, motionless and set. There was no wind.

I used both hands to hang onto the saddle and continually I fought against falling down into the darkness that stole upon me every time I forgot to fight it back.

"You all right?" asked Sara.

I don't remember answering her. I was busy hanging on to the saddle and fighting back the darkness.

We stopped at noon. I don't remember eating, although I suppose I did. I do remember one thing. We had stopped in a rugged badlands area below one of the ridges and I was propped up against a wall of earth, so that I was looking at another wall of earth and the wall, I saw, was distinctly stratified with various strata of different thicknesses, some of them no more than a few inches deep while others would have been four or five feet, and each of them a distinctive color. As I looked at the strata I began to sense the time which each one represented. I tried to turn it off, for with this recognition was associated a most unrestful feeling, as if I were stretching all my faculties to a straining point, as if I were using all my energy and strength to drive deeper into this sense of time which the wall of earth invoked. But there was no way to turn it off; for some reason I was committed and must keep on and could only hope that at some point along the way I would reach a stopping point—either a point where I could go no further or a point where I had learned or sensed all there was to learn or sense.

Time became real to me in a way I can't express in words. Instead of a concept, it became a material thing that I could distinguish (although it was not seeing and it was not feeling) and could understand. The years and eons did not roll back for me. Rather, they stood revealed. It was as if a chronological chart had become alive and solid. Through the wavering lines of the time structure, as if the structure might have been a pane of glass made inexpertly, I could faintly glimpse the planet as it had been in those ages past—ages which were no longer in the past but now stood in the present, as if I were outside of time and independent of time and could see and evaluate it exactly as I could have seen and evaluated some material structure that coexisted with me on my own time level.

The next thing I remember was waking up and for a moment it seemed to me that I was waking from that interval when I saw time spread out before me, but in a little while I realized that could not be so, for the badlands now were gone and it was night and I was stretched out on my back with blankets under me and another covering me. I looked straight up at the sky and it was a different sky than I had ever seen. For a moment I was puzzled and lay quietly, trying to work out the puzzle. Then, as if someone had told me (although no one did), I knew that I was looking at the galaxy, all spread out before me. Almost directly overhead was the brilliant glow of the central area and spread out all around it, like a gauzy whirlpool, were the arms and outlying sectors.

I turned my head to one side and here and there, just above the horizon, were brilliant stars and I realized that I was seeing a few of the globular clusters, or more unlikely, other nearby stars, fellows with the star about which the planet I was on revolved—those outlaw members of the galactic system which in ages past had fled the system and now lay in the outer dark at the edge of galactic space.

A fire was burning—almost burned down—just a few feet from me and a hunched and blanketed figure lay close beside the fire. Just beyond the fire were the hunched-up hobbies, gently rocking back and forth, with the dim firelight reflecting from their polished hides.

A hand touched my shoulder and I twisted around to face in that direction. Sara knelt beside me.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"I feel fine," I said, and that was the truth. Somehow I felt new and whole and my head and thoughts were clear with an echoing, frighten-

ing clarity—as if I were the first human waking to the first day of a brand-new world, as if time had been turned back to the first hour that ever was.

I sat up and the covering blanket fell off me.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"A day's journey from the city," she told me. "Tuck wanted to stop. He said you were in no condition to be traveling, but I insisted we keep on. I thought you'd want it that way."

I shook my head, bewildered. "I remember none of it. You are sure Tuck said that we should stop?"

She nodded. "You hung onto the saddle and were terribly sick, but you answered when we spoke to you. And there was no place to stop, no good camping spot."

"Where's Hoot?"

"Out on guard. Prowling. He says he doesn't need to sleep."

I got up and stretched, like a dog will stretch after a good night's sleep. I felt fine. God, how fine I felt!

"Is there any food?" I asked.

She got to her feet and laughed.

"What are you laughing at?" I asked.

"You," she said.

"Me?"

"Because you are all right. I was worried. All of us were worried."

"It was that damn Hoot," I said. "He drained my blood."

"I know," she said. "He explained it to me. He had to. There was nothing else to do."

I shivered, thinking of it. "It's unbelievable," I said.

"Hoot himself," she said, "is unbelievable."

"We're lucky that we have him," I told her. "And to think that I almost left him back there in the dunes. I wanted to leave him. We had trouble enough without reaching out for more."

She led the way to the fire.

"Build it up," she said. "I'll fix some food for you."

Beside the fire was a little pile of brush, twisted branches broken from some of the desert trees. I squatted down and fed some of them to the fire and the flame blazed up, licking at the wood.

"I'm sorry about the laser gun," I said. "Without it, we stand sort of naked."

"I still have my rifle," she pointed out. "It has a lot of power. In good hands . . ."

"Like yours," I said.

"Like mine," she said.

Beyond the fire the heap of blankets lay unmoving. I gestured toward them. "How is Tuck?" I asked. "Any sign of him snapping out of it?"

"You're too hard on him," she said. "You have no patience with him. He's different. He's not like the two of us. We are very much alike. Have you thought of that?"

"Yes," I said, "I have."

She brought a pan and set it on the coals, squatting down beside me.

"The two of us will get through," she said. "Tuck won't. He'll break up, somewhere along the way."

And strangely I found myself thinking that perhaps Tuck now had less to live for—that since Smith had disappeared he had lost at least a part of his reason for continuing to live. Had that been why, I wondered, he had appropriated the doll? Did he need to have something he could cling to and make cling to him by offering it protection? Although, I recalled, he had grabbed hold of the doll before George had disappeared. But that might not apply at all, for he may have known, or at least suspected, that George would disappear. Certainly he had not been surprised when it had happened.

"There's another thing," said Sara, "you should know. It's about the trees. You can see for yourself as soon as it is light. We're camped just under the brow of a hill and from the hilltop you can see a lot of country and a lot of trees, twenty or thirty of them, perhaps. And they're not just haphazard. They are planted. I am sure of that."

"You mean like an orchard?"

"That is right," she said. "Just like an orchard. Each tree so far from every other tree. Planted in a checkerboard sort of pattern. Someone, at some time, had an orchard here."

II

We went on—and on and on.

Day followed day and we traveled from dawn until the failing of the light. The weather held. There was no rain and very little wind. From the appearance of the country, rain came seldom here. The country changed at times. There were days when we struggled uphill and down in twisted badland terrain; there were other days on end when we traveled land so flat that we seemed to be in the center of a concave bowl—a shallow dish—with the horizons climbing upward on every hand. Ahead of us what at first had been a purple cloud lying low against the horizon became unmistakably a far-off mountain range, still purpled by the distance.

Now there was life, although not a great deal of it. There were honking things that ran along the hilltops when we crossed the badlands area and went streaking down the painted gulleys, gobbling their excitement. There were the ones we called the striders, seldom seen and always at a distance, so far off that even with our glasses we never got a good look at them, but from what we saw incredibly twisted life forms that seemed to be walking on stilts, lurching and striding along at a rapid rate, not seeming to move swiftly but covering a lot of ground. And out on the dessicated plains the whizzers—animals (if they were animals) the size of wolves that moved so fast we were unable to see what they really were or how they traveled. They were a blur coming toward us and a whish going past and another blur as they went away. But although they came close, they never bothered us. Nor did the honkers or the striders.

The vegetation changed, too, from one type of landscape to another. Out on some of the plains strange curly grasses grew and in some of the

badlands areas distorted trees clung to the hillsides and huddled in the gullies. They looked more like palms than pines, although they were not palms. Their wood was incredibly tough and oily and when we passed through regions where they grew we collected as many of their fallen branches as the hobbies could carry to serve as wood for campfires.

And always there were the trees, the great monsters that towered miles into the sky. Now we knew, without any question, that they had been planted, that the land had been surveyed and they had been laid out in orchards, forming a geometric gridwork over the face of the land. We did not come closer than a mile or so to any one of them. The trail seemed to be engineered to avoid them. And while at times we saw them shooting out their seed pods, they never shot at us.

"It's almost," Sara said, "as if they'd learned a lesson. As if they knew what might happen to them if they fire at us."

"Except it wouldn't happen now," I reminded her, blaming myself once again for having left the ship without going back to the control room to get the extra laser gun and the repair kit for it.

"They don't know that, of course," she said.

But I wasn't quite as sure as she was.

At times, watching through glasses, we saw swarms of the little ratlike creatures scurry out of burrows some distance from the trees to collect the seeds from the thrown pods, carrying them to what undoubtedly were hidden pits to deposit them. We never tried to investigate the pits; they were too close to the trees. If the trees were willing to leave us alone, we were quite glad to reciprocate.

The trail kept on, at times growing faint, at other times broader and better marked, as if at some time in the past parts of it had been more heavily traveled than were other sections of it. But the travel in any event could not have been heavy. We did not meet a soul.

One day the trail was crossed by what at one time had been a paved road, with only a few of the paving blocks remaining. The few that did remain were either shattered or canted out of place, but standing at the point where it crossed the trail, almost at right angles, one could look for a long distance either way along the slash marked out by the road, running straight without a single curve.

We held a conference. The road somehow was attractive, in some ways seemed more important than the trail we had been following. In times past it would have linked points of some importance, while the

trail went dawdling across the land in a most haphazard way. But the trail did bear some signs of ancient travel. The road bore none at all. It still existed only because enough time had not passed to erase it from the landscape. And the trail trended in a northerly direction and it was to the north that we understood we might find the centaurs. The road ran east and west. Another point: The trail undoubtedly was older than the road; it had an ancient look about it. In certain places where it was constricted by geographic features and thus not allowed to wander, it had been cut to a depth of three or four feet into the soil. The evidence was that it had been used for millennia, that it had been a route of travel in times beyond all telling.

With some reluctance, we made our decision, composed half of logic, half of hunch. We continued on the trail.

Someone had been here—how long ago? Someone who had built the city and laid out the road and planted the trees. But now the city stood silent and empty and the road had fallen into ruin. What did it mean, I wondered. A great deal of time and energy had been spent upon this planet. And then the spenders of this time and energy had left, taking steps before they left to insure that anyone who landed on the planet would have no chance to leave. Landing otherwhere than in the city, a ship undoubtedly would be safe and could take off again. But any ship approaching the planet would almost certainly land nowhere but in the city, lured in by the signals that reached far out in space.

Along the trail at intervals the beehive houses of stone still were encountered, squatting on their hilltops. An examination of them showed nothing. There was no debris, nothing left behind. They had not, apparently, been used at any time as permanent abodes; they were simply stopping places, to be used as shelter for a night or two. We camped out in the open; we never used them. For all their simplicity, they had a musty feel about them.

As we traveled, we shook down into shape. Tuck rode most of the time. He was too awkward, too gangling, to walk. Sara and I took turns at riding. Hoot continued to be file closer, bringing up the rear, hustling the hobbies along. There was no spoken agreement to this arrangement; we simply fell into a travel pattern. The hobbies remained sulky and after a time we did not try to talk with them. Tuck and I got along. We did not grow to like one another better; we just got along. He still carried his ridiculous doll, clutched against his chest. Day after day he

drew away from us, retreating more deeply inside himself. After the evening meal he sat alone, not talking, not noticing.

We were covering a lot of ground, but we didn't seem to be getting anywhere. We were marching deeper and deeper into an unknown land which wasn't hostile at the moment, but perhaps could turn so at a moment.

Late one afternoon we came to a badlands area and when we'd gone into it a ways realized that it was one of the really bad ones and somewhat more extensive than we'd first imagined. So when we reached a fairly level place we stopped despite there being another hour or two of light.

We got the packs off the hobbies and stacked the supplies in a pile and the hobbies went wandering off, as they often did, as if they took this chance to be shut of us for at least a little time. But it was all right. Hoot always went off with them and he always brought them back. Through the days that we had marched he had served as a sheepdog for that pack of hobbies and they were safe with him.

We got a fire started and Sara began putting a meal together while Tuck and I went up a draw to bring in some firewood.

We were coming back, each of us with an armload of wood, when we heard the frightened screaming of the hobbies and the clangor of their rockers as they ran. We dropped the wood and set off swiftly for the camp and as we came in sight of it, the hobbies came boiling up out of a narrow gully. They were running fast and without pausing for an instant they overran the camp, scattering the blazing fire and the pots and pans Sara had set out, with Sara herself running for her life to get out of the way.

They didn't even hesitate when they reached the camp, but turned to the right to head back down the trail. Behind them came Hoot. He was running close against the ground, the only way he could run, and he was making speed as well. He was little more than a dark streak at the hobbies' heels, but when he reached the camp he skidded to a halt and swung around broadside. Standing there, braced on his tiny feet, he blazed—as he had done back in the city when the hobbies had launched a sudden charge. Blue haze enveloped him and the world did a funny sort of jig and up on the trail the hobbies went flying, spinning in the air. But they got to their rockers once again and went plunging on and Hoot blazed once again, just as they reached the top of the hill that

rose above the camp. This time they disappeared, flipped and hurled and blown over the hill by whatever Hoot was doing to them.

Cursing like a madman, I went tearing up the hill, but by the time I reached the top the hobbies were a long ways off and I saw there was no stopping them. They were high-tailing out of there, back toward the city.

I stood and watched them until they were almost out of sight, then went down the hill and back to camp.

The campfire still lay scattered, with sticks of charred and smoking wood lying all about, and a couple of cooking pans lay crushed by the hobbies' rockers. Sara was kneeling on the ground above Hoot, who was lying on his side, a ghost of his former self. And that was no figure of speech—he was a ghost of his former self. He had a hazy, half-substantial look about him, as if he might have tried to go somewhere and had gotten stuck and was halfway between this world and another one.

I ran forward and went down on my knees beside him. I reached out my hands to pick him up and as I reached I wondered if there was anything that I could pick up. Strangely enough, there was—I would have sworn there wouldn't be. I lifted him and he was very light; he couldn't have weighed half his normal weight. I hugged him close against me.

He hooted at me feebly. "Mike, I try so hard."

"What is the matter, Hoot?" I cried at him. "What is happening to you? What can we do for you?"

He didn't answer and I looked at Sara and tears were streaming down her face. "Oh, Mike," she said. "Oh, Mike."

Tuck stood just a few feet behind her and for once he'd dropped the doll and his face was long and sad.

Hoot stirred feebly. "Life I need," he said, his voice so feeble I could scarcely make it out. "Permission to take some life from you."

And at those words, Tuck stepped quickly forward, and leaning, snatched Hoot away from me. He straightened, holding Hoot tight against him as he had held the doll. His eyes blazed at me.

"Not you, captain," he cried. "You need all the life you have. I have life to give."

"Permission?" Hoot asked, an eerie, hooting whisper.

"Yes, go ahead," said Tuck. "Please will you go ahead."

Sara and I, crouching on the ground, watched in prayerful fascination. It took only a few minutes, perhaps only a few seconds, but the time

stretched out into what seemed hours. Neither of us moved and I felt my muscles cramp from tension. Slowly Hoot lost the insubstantial look and became himself again—coming back out of that other world into which he had been bound.

And finally, stooping, Tuck set him on his feet, then himself collapsed into a heap.

I leaped to my feet and picked up Tuck. He hung limply in my arms.

"Quick," I said to Sara. "Blankets."

She placed blankets on the ground and I laid him on them and got him straightened out, then took another blanket and tucked it close about him. Lying on the ground a few feet away was the fallen doll. I picked it up and laid it on his chest. One of his hands moved slowly up to grasp and hold it there.

He opened his eyes and smiled up into my face.

"Thanks, captain," he said.

12

We sat around the fire in the deepening dark.

"Bones," said Hoot. "Bones upon the ground."

"You're sure of that?" I asked. "Could it have been something else? Why should the hobbies be so scared of bones?"

"Sure of it," said Hoot. "Bones was all to see. Nothing else to sight."

"Maybe certain kinds of bones," said Sara. "The skeleton of something they are afraid of, even dead."

Somewhere in the fastness of the badlands a band of honkers were talking back and forth, breaking forth at times into flurries of insane gobblings. The fire flared as a new piece of the oily wood took flame and the wind that came flowing down the draw had an edge to it.

And here we were, I thought. Marooned in the center of a howling

wilderness, not even sure where we had been heading, the winding trail our only orientation and the only place to flee to, if we could flee, back to that great white city, which in its way was as much of a howling wilderness as this.

But this, I sensed, was not the time to bring the matter up. In the morning, at the beginning of a brand new day, we'd have a look at it and then decide the best course for us to take.

Hoot waved a tentacle at the pile of blankets.

"I greedy," he said. "I take too much of him. He have less than I imagine."

"He'll be all right," said Sara. "He is sleeping now. He drank a bowl of broth."

"But why?" I demanded. "Why did the damn fool do it? I was ready and willing. I was the one Hoot asked. It should have been me. After all, Hoot and I . . ."

"Captain," Sara said, "have you considered that this was the first chance Tuck had to make a contribution? He must have felt a fairly useless member of this expedition. You have done your best to make him feel that way."

"Let us face it," I said. "Up until he did this job for Hoot, he had been fairly useless."

"And you begrudge him this chance?"

"No," I said. "No, of course I don't. What bothers me is what he said. I have life to give, he said. What did he mean by that?"

"I wouldn't know," said Sara. "There is no point now in worrying about what he might have meant. The thing we have to worry about is what we do now. We have been put afoot. Whatever we do we'll have to leave supplies behind. Water is the problem. Most of what we can carry will have to be water. Unless the hobbies should come back."

"They won't come back," I told her. "They've been waiting for this chance ever since we left the city. They would have deserted in a minute if it hadn't been for Hoot. He kept them in line."

"Surprise they catch me by," said Hoot. "I was ready for them. I bop them time and yet again and it did no good."

"The horrible thought occurs to me," said Sara, "that this may be standard operating procedure. Take a group of visitors out here somewhere and leave them stranded, with little chance of getting back. Not, perhaps, that it would do much good if they did get back . . ."

"Not us," I said. "Other people, maybe, but not these particular people. Not us, around this fire."

She glanced sharply at me and not approvingly—but that was not peculiar. By and large, she did not approve of me.

"I can't quite be sure," she said, "if you are trying to make fun of me or are whistling in the dark."

"Whistling in the dark," I said. "You have no idea how much a little inspired and determined whistling will achieve."

"I suppose you know exactly what to do," she said. "You have it all in mind. You'll disclose it to us in a sudden flash of genius. You've been in jams before and you never panic and . . ."

"Oh," I said, "lay off it. Let's talk in the morning."

And the terrible thing about it was that I really meant let us wait till morning. It was the first time in my life that I had ever put off decision making. It was the first time in my life that I found myself reluctant to face what I was up against. It was these badlands, I told myself—these barren, desolate stretches of tortured land and twisted trees. They took the heart out of a man, they ground him down, they made him as desolate and no-account as the tangled, forsaken land itself. One could almost feel himself melting into the landscape, becoming a part of it, as uncaring and as hopeless.

"In the morning," Sara said, "we'll go and see Hoot's bones."

13

We found the bones about a half mile down the gully. It made a sharp turn to the left and when we rounded the turn, there they were. I had expected that we would find a few bones scattered about, gleaming against the mudlike brownness of the soil, but instead of that there was

a heap of bones, a great windrow of them that stretched from one wall of the gully to the other.

They were large bones, many of them a foot in diameter or more, and a grinning skull that was so located in the heap that it appeared to be peeking out at us, was elephant-size or bigger. They were yellowed and crumbling, porous where exposure to the sun and weather had leached out the calcium. While heaped mostly in a windrow, some were scattered about the edges of the windrow, probably hauled there by scavengers which in some long-gone day must have swarmed to feasting.

Beyond the bones the gully ended abruptly. The walls of earth, with rocks from fist-size to boulders, sticking out of them like raisins in a cake, swept around in a semicircle to close off the depression. The bones lay fifty feet or so from the end of the gully and at the foot of the earthen wall which marked its end lay a great jumble of rocks which in ages past had fallen from the cliff.

The gully itself was depressing enough, with its earthy barrenness, lonely beyond all concept of loneliness. One would have said that as it stood the place could not have been made more lonely or more barren, but that would have been wrong, for the bones added that one further factor or dimension which pushed it to a point of awesome loneliness that seemed to be more than the human mind could bear.

I felt uneasy, almost ill—and it takes a lot to make me ill. There was a feeling that one should turn from this place and flee, that something which had happened here long ago had cast upon this place an aura of evil and of awfulness to which no one should subject himself.

And out of this awfulness a voice came to us.

"Gracious sirs or mesdames," it piped, loud and cheerfully, "or whatever you may chance to be, pity please upon me, hauling me hence from this awkward and embarrassing position in which I have been long since."

I could not have stirred if I had been paid a million. The voice nailed me into place and held me stupefied.

The voice spoke again. "Against the wall," it said. "Behind the jumbled rocks which, forsooth, proved so poor a fortress as to get all killed but I."

"It could be a trap," said Sara in a hard metallic voice that sounded strange from her. "The hobbies might have sensed the trap. That's maybe why they ran."

"Please," pleaded the piping voice. "Please away you do not go. There

been others and they did turn away. There is nothing here to fright you."

I moved forward a step or two.

"Captain, don't!" cried Sara.

"We can't walk away," I said. "We would always wonder."

It wasn't what I meant to say or what I wanted to do. All I wanted to do was turn around and run. It was as if another person, some sort of second person, a surrogate of me, had spoken.

But all the time I was walking forward and when I came to the pile of bones I began to scramble over them. They made unsteady footing and they crumbled under me and shifted, but I made it over them and was on the other side.

"Oh, most noble creature," cried the piping voice, "you come to sympathetic rescue of my unworthy self."

I raced across the space between the bones and boulders and went swarming up the pile of rocks from which the voice seemed to come. They were good-sized boulders, better than man-high, and when I scrambled to the top of them and looked down behind them I saw what had been piping at us.

It was a hobby, its milk-glass whiteness gleaming in the shadow, flat upon its back with its rockers sticking straight up in the air. One side of it lay against the boulder that I stood upon, wedged tightly against it by another smaller boulder which had been dislodged from the pile. Pinned between these two masses of rock, the hobby was held completely helpless.

"Thank you, gracious one," it piped. "You did not turn away. See you I am unable, sir, but from other evidences I deduce you are humanoid. Humanoids be the best of people. Filled with much compassion and no little valor."

It waggled its rockers at me in a gesture of gratitude.

The trapped hobby was not the only thing behind the barricade. Out of the dirt a humanoid skull grinned at me and there were scattered bones and chunks of rusted metal.

"How many years ago?" I asked the hobby, and it was a foolish thing to ask, for there were other more important questions that I should have asked.

"Honored sir," it said, "of time all track I've lost. The minutes run like years and the years like centuries and it seems to me that since I last stood upon my rockers an eternity has passed. No one upside down

as I am can be relied upon to keep a count of time. There be others of us, but they ran away. And still others of us, but they died. I be the only one left out of that noble company."

"All right," I said, "just take it easy. We'll have you out of there."

"Take it easy," piped the hobby, "I have done for long. The time I passed with many thoughts and fantasies and much hoping and much fanciful imaginings of what would happen to me. I knew that at length the rocks would rot away, for this material of mine outlasts any rock. But hope I did that before that came about there would be other intervention, from such kind-intentioned person as yourself."

The others were scrambling across the pile of bones and I waved them on.

"We have a hobby here," I shouted at them, "and there is at least one human skull and some scattered bones."

And even as I told them this I was not so much wondering about what might have happened here or why humans may have died here, but was thinking that with the rescued hobby we would be trapped no longer in this little stretch of badlands. The hobby could carry the water we would need either to continue up the trail or race back to the city.

It took all three of us, with Hoot standing off and calling out encouragement to us, to roll away the smaller rock that held the hobby pinned against the bigger boulder. And when we had it rolled away we had to tip that stupid hobby over and set him on his rockers. He stared at us solemnly, which, I suppose, was the only way that he could stare, for hobbies are not designed for facial expression.

"I be Paint," he told us, "although at times I be called Old Paint, which is beyond my feeble understanding, for I be no older than the other hobbies. We all be forged and fabricated at the selfsame time and there be no one of us older than the other."

"There were other hobbies?" Sara asked.

"There be ten of us," said Paint. "Nine others ran away and the only reason for my staying is the unfortunate circumstance from which you kindly liberated me. We be forged on distant planet, of which I be ignorant the name, and brought here to this planet. Coming up the trail we be attacked by a horde of raveners, result of which you see."

"The ones who brought you here, the ones who fabricated you," asked Sara. "They were the same as us?"

"Same as you," said Paint. "There be no profit in talking more of them. They died."

"Why were they here?" she asked. "What were they looking for?"

"For another one of them," said Paint. "For humanoid person long disappeared, but with many stories told."

"For Lawrence Arlen Knight?"

"I know not," the hobby said. "They do not tell me things."

14

We decided to go on, following the trail. We threshed it out as we sat around the smoky campfire, with Paint standing beside the pile of our supplies, gently rocking back and forth. Actually there wasn't much threshing out to do. Tuck didn't really care. He sat a little apart from us, clutching his doll tight against him and silently rocking back and forth. It was enough to give a man the jitters, watching the two of them, Paint and Tuck, rocking back and forth. Sara and I made the decision and there was no real argument. There was nothing, we were convinced, for us back there in the city. And so far as we knew, there was nothing for us up there on the trail, unless it were the sort of thing that had happened to those men back there in the gully. But the very fact that other humans, Lord knows how long ago, had followed this same trail, apparently for the selfsame reason that we followed it, seemed at least to Sara a powerful argument that we should continue.

But there was one thing, I figured, I should get straight with her.

"Knight must be dead," I said. "Surely you know that. You must have known it back on Earth when we started out."

She flared at me. "There you go again! Can't you let loose! You've been against this idea from the start. Why did you ever come with us?"

"I told you that before," I said. "The money."

"Then what do you care if he's dead or alive? What do you care if we find him or we don't?"

"That's an easy one," I told her. "I don't give a damn one way or the other."

"But you're willing to go on? You sounded just a while ago as if you preferred going on."

"I think I do," I said. "We might find something up ahead. We'll find nothing going back."

"We might round up the hobbies."

I shook my head. "If either the hobbies or the gnome found we were coming back, we'd never see them, much less lay a hand on them. There must be a million places in that city where you could hide an army."

"The hobbies must be the ones who ran away," she said, "down there in the gully. Do you suppose that they remembered when they saw the bones? Do you suppose they might have forgotten, but when they saw the bones remembered and it was such a shock to them, this old memory from the past . . ."

"There were eight of them," I said, "and Paint makes nine. He said there were ten. Where did the other go?"

"We may never know," she said.

I couldn't figure out what difference all this made, why we should be sitting here and speculating. I didn't really see what difference anything could make. We would go on and we'd not know where we were going, but we could always hope that we'd find a better place than this bone-dry wilderness with its flinty ridges and its twisted badlands, we could always hope that we might get a break somehow and that we'd recognize it soon enough to take advantage of it.

The fact that the men whose bones lay there in the gully's end had been seeking someone did not necessarily mean they knew he'd come this way. Probably they had been as confused as we were. And there was no real evidence that Knight had been the one they had been looking for.

So we sat there by the campfire and planned it out.

We would load Paint with Roscoe's useless carcass and all the water and food that he could carry. Tuck and I would carry heavy packs while Sara, the only one of us with a weapon, would carry a light load, so that in a moment of emergency she could drop her pack and be ready with the rifle. Hoot would carry nothing. He would be our scout, ranging out ahead of us and spying out the land.

That afternoon, much as we disliked the doing of it, we went down the gully and dug through the fort. We found three human skulls and

half a dozen rusted weapons that were too far gone to determine what kind of guns they might have been. Paint recalled that there had been eight humans and the large number of scattered bones seemed to bear him out. But three skulls were all we found.

Back at camp we made up our packs and hauled the rest of the supplies off the trail, caching them in a narrow fissure that ran down into the gully. Using branches, we brushed out our tracks leading off the trail. Neither the caching job or the brushing out of tracks was done too expertly. But I had the feeling that it was all a waste of time, that the trail had been long abandoned and that we might have been the first to travel it for a century or more.

The day was far gone, but we loaded up and left. There was none of us who wanted to stay in that camp for a minute longer than was necessary. We fled from it, glad to get away, to be free of the depressing walls of barren earth and the sense of ancient doom one could feel hanging over it. And there was, as well, a sense of urgency, a never-expressed, perhaps never-admitted feeling that we were running out of time.

15

Hoot stumbled on the centaurs the second day out.

We still were in the badlands. Heretofore any of them we had come to had been crossed in a few hours or a day at most. But this badlands area seemed to stretch on forever and we all looked forward to the end of it, if the end should ever come. Loaded down with heavy packs as Tuck and I were, it was rugged going, mostly up and down, with only short respites when the trail ran for short distances across more level land.

Hoot kept out ahead of us. We saw him only now and then and then only glimpses of him when he stood on some high point to look back and see how we were doing.

Shortly before noon I saw him sidewheeling rapidly down the trail

above us. Glad of an excuse to rest, I dropped my pack and waited for him. So did Sara, but Tuck merely stopped when we stopped and did not drop his pack. He stood there, hunched over under the weight of it, staring at the ground. Since we'd left the camp where we had lost the hobbies, he had been more withdrawn than ever, fumbling along without paying attention to anything at all.

Hoot came slithering down the trail and stopped in front of us.

"Hobbies ahead," he hooted at me. "Ten times ten of them. But without their rockers and with faces such as you."

"Centaurs," Sara said.

"Playing," panted Hoot. "In depression in the hills. Playing at game. Knocking sphere about with sticks."

"Centaurs playing polo," Sara said, enchanted. "What could be more appropriate!"

She reached up to brush the truant lock of hair out of her eyes and watching her, I caught a glimpse again of the girl who had met me in the hallway of that old house back on Earth—as she had looked before the dust and wear of travel on this planet had blunted the sharp edge of her beauty.

"Understand do I," said Hoot, "that you seek for them. Glad I be to find them."

"Thank you, Hoot," said Sara.

I reached down and picked up my pack and shrugged into the harness.

"Lead on, Hoot," I said.

"Do you think," asked Sara, "that the centaurs still might have the brain case? They might have lost it or broken it or used it up some way."

"We'll know," I said, "when we talk with them."

"What about his memory?" she asked. "If we get the case and put it into him, will the memory still be there? Will he remember as well as when it was taken out of him?"

"The memory won't be lost," I assured her. "Everything he ever knew will still be there. It's the way a robotic brain is made. They don't forget like people."

There was a chance, of course, that there'd be more than one tribe of centaurs on the planet, that there might be many tribes of them, and that this one up ahead, engaged in their polo playing, would not be the tribe that had Roscoe's brain case. But I didn't mention this to her.

There was a chance as well they'd not be interested in parting with it. Although I couldn't imagine what earthly good a robotic brain case would be to anyone unless they had a robot.

When we neared the top of the hill beyond the one down which Hoot had scrambled to bring us word, he whispered to us that the centaurs were just beyond the hill.

I'm not sure why we did it, for no one passed the word to do it, but we all scrooched down when we neared the top of the hill and peeked over it.

Below us lay a wide flat area of sand and scrawny vegetation and beyond that little area the red and yellow of the desert lay, with the badlands formations finally petering out.

Hoot had been wrong in his counting of them. There were many more than ten times ten. The bulk of them were ranged solidly around a rectangular playing field, which was a playing field only by the virtue of a game being played upon it. It was a level chunk of desert, with two rows of white stones serving as goals. Upon the field a dozen centaurs were involved in furious action, long clubs clutched in their hands, fighting for the possession of a ball, whacking it back and forth—a rude and very elemental version of the noble game of polo.

Even as we watched, however, the game came to an end. The players trotted off the field and the crowd began breaking up.

Beyond the polo field a few tents were set up, although one should not have called them tents. They were simply large squares of some sort of dirty fabric supported by poles thrust into the ground, designed perhaps for nothing more than shelter from the sun. Here and there among the shelters were piles of packs, probably containing the few possessions of the tribe.

The centaurs were milling about, with no seeming purpose, exactly as a crowd of people on an aimless holiday would mill around.

"What do we do now?" asked Sara. "Just walk down to them?"

Tuck came out of his trance. "Not all of us," he said. "Just one."

"And I suppose that's you," I said, half-kidding.

"Of course it's me," said Tuck. "If anyone is going to get killed, I'm the candidate."

"I don't think," said Sara, "that they'd just up and kill someone."

"That's what you think," I said.

"Let's look at it logically," said Tuck, in that dirty supercilious way

of his that made you want to belt him. "Of all of us, I am the least likely to get killed. I am a humble-looking person, very inoffensive and with no bluster in me and probably not appearing quite right in the head. And I have this brown robe and I don't wear shoes, but sandals . . ."

"Those babies down there," I told him, "don't know a thing about brown robes or sandals. And they could care less if you were bright or stupid. If they feel like killing someone . . ."

"But you can't know that," said Sara. "They might be friendly people."

"Do they look friendly to you?"

"No, I guess they don't," she said, "although you can't tell just by looking at them. But Tuck may have something going for him. Maybe they don't know about brown robes and sandals, but maybe they could sense a simple soul. They might see right off he isn't dangerous but is filled with kindly thoughts."

And I was thinking all the time she was saying this that she must have someone else in mind, for it couldn't be our Tuck.

"I'm the one to go, by God," I said. "So let's just cut out this jabbering and I'll go on down there. They'd mop up the place with Tuck."

"I don't suppose they would with you," she said.

"You're damned right they wouldn't. I know how to handle . . ."

"Captain," said Tuck, "why won't you ever listen to reason? You just go popping off. You got to be the big shot. Consider just two things. What I said I meant. They might not clobber me because I'm a different kind of man than you are. There wouldn't be the satisfaction of taking off on me there'd be in taking off on you. There isn't too much fun in killing or in beating up someone who is pitiful and weak and if I only put my mind to it, I can look awful pitiful and weak. And the other thing is this–you're needed more than I am. If something happened to me it wouldn't make much difference, but it would make a lot of difference to this expedition if you went down there and got yourself knocked off."

I stared at him, aghast that he had had the guts to say what he'd just said. "You mean all this foolishness?" I asked.

"Of course I do," he said. "What did you think, that I was just grandstanding? Did you think I thought you wouldn't let me go and no matter what I said, I wouldn't have to go, that I would be safe?"

I didn't answer him, but he was right. That was exactly what I'd thought.

"Whoever goes," said Sara, "will have to ride Old Paint. The kind of things they are, they'd have more respect for you if you were riding Paint. And another thing, Paint could get you out of there if the situation started going bad."

"Mike," honked Hoot, "the holy one speaks vivid sort of sense."

"It's all damn foolishness," I told them. "I'm the one who is supposed to take the risks. I'm being paid for it."

"Mike," said Sara, sharply, "stop being infantile. Someone has to go down there–I might even be the one. There are three of us, not counting Hoot, and we can't send him down there. It must be one of us. So let's just marshal all the angles . . ."

"But it's not just going down to face them," I protested. "We also have to bargain for the brain case. Tuck would get it all screwed up."

We crouched, glaring at one another.

"Toss a coin," I growled. "Would you settle for a toss?"

"A coin only has two sides," said Sara.

"That's enough," I said. "You're out of this. It's either Tuck or I."

"No coin," said Tuck. "I'm the one who's going."

Sara looked at me. "I think we should let him go," she said. "He wants to. He is willing. He will do all right."

"The bargaining?" I asked.

"We want the robot's brain case," said Tuck. "We'll give almost anything for it if we have to give it and . . ."

"Up to and including the rifle," said Sara.

I blew up at her. "Not the rifle! We may need that rifle badly. It's the only thing we have."

"We need the brain case, too," said Sara. "Without it we are sunk. And we may not need the rifle. Since we've been here I have fired it once and even that once was a senseless piece of business."

"There were the men back in the gully."

She shrugged. "They had weapons. How much good did the weapons do them?"

"All I can do," said Tuck, "is to find if they have the case and if they'd be willing to let loose of it. The actual bargaining will come later. We can all take part in it."

"All right," I said.

Let him go ahead and make a mess of it. If he did maybe we could

give up this silly hunt for Lawrence Arlen Knight and try to figure out how to get off this planet. Although I had only the most foggy of ideas how to go about it.

I walked over to Paint and unloaded him, piling the water tins to the side of the trail and draping Roscoe's limp metal body over them.

"All right, sport," I said to Tuck.

He walked over and got into the saddle. He looked down at me and held down his hand. I took it and there was more strength in those long, lean fingers than I had thought there'd be.

"Good luck," I said to him, and then Paint went galloping over the hilltop, heading down the trail. We peeked over the hilltop, watching.

I had said good luck to him and meant it. God knows, the poor damn fool would need all the luck there was.

Somehow he looked small and pitiful, bouncing along on the hobby's back, the hood pulled up around his face and his robe fluttering behind him.

The trail turned and dipped and we lost sight of him, but in a few minutes he reappeared, riding across the flat toward the milling centaurs. Someone in the milling crowd caught sight of him and a shout went up. All the centaurs spun around to look at him and the milling stopped.

This is it, I thought, and I was watching so hard that I held my breath. In another second they might rush him and that would be the end of it. But they didn't rush him; they just stood and looked.

Paint went rocking forward, Tuck bouncing on him like a doll clothed in a scrap of brown cloth. And that doll of his, I thought . . .

"What about the doll?" I whispered to Sara. I don't know why I whispered. It was foolish of me. I could have shouted and that herd of centaurs would not have paid attention. They were busy watching Tuck. "What about the doll? Did he leave it here?"

"No," she said, "he took it with him. He tucked it underneath the belt and pulled the belt up tight to hold it."

"For the love of Christ!" I said.

"You keep thinking," she said, "that it is just a doll, that there's something wrong with him to carry it around. But there isn't. He sees something in it you and I can't see. It's not just a good luck charm, like a rabbit's foot. It's a good deal more than that. I've watched him with it. He handles it tenderly and reverently. As if it were religious. A Madonna, maybe."

I scarcely heard the last of what she had to say, for Paint was getting close to the herd of centaurs and was slowing down. Finally, fifty feet or so from them, the hobby stopped and stood waiting. Tuck sat there like a lump. He hadn't raised his hand in a peaceful gesture. He hadn't done a thing; he'd just ridden up to them, sitting on Old Paint like a lumpy sack.

I looked around. Sara had the glasses trained on the flat.

"Is he talking to them?" I asked.

"I can't tell," she said. "He has the hood pulled up around his face."

It was all to the good, I told myself. They hadn't killed him out of hand. There might still be hope.

Two of the centaurs trotted out to meet him, maneuvering so there'd be one on each side of him.

"Here," said Sara, handing me the glasses.

Through them I could see nothing of Tuck except the back of that pulled-up hood, but could plainly see the faces of the two centaurs. They were the faces of tough and strong-willed men, brutal faces. They were far more humanoid than I had expected them to be. They had the appearance of listening to Tuck and from time to time one or the other of them seemed to make short replies. Then, suddenly, they were laughing, great shouts of uproarious laughter, taunting, contemptuous laughter, and behind them the herd took up the laughter.

I put down the glasses and crouched there, listening to the distant booming of that mass laughter which echoed in the twisted hills and gullies.

Sara made a wry face at me. "I wonder what is happening," she said.

"Old Tuck," I told her, "has muffed it once again."

The laughter quieted and died away and once again the two centaurs were talking with Tuck. I handed the glasses back to Sara. I could see as much as I wanted to see without the help of them.

One of the centaurs swung about and shouted to someone in the crowd. For a moment the three of them seemed to be waiting, then one of the centaurs in the crowd trotted out, carrying something that glittered in the sunlight.

"What is it?" I asked Sara, who had the glasses up.

"It's a shield," she said. "And there seems to be a belt of some sort. Now I can see. It's a belt and sword. They're giving them to Tuck."

Paint was wheeling about and heading back, the sunlight glinting off the shield and sword that Tuck held in front of him in the saddle. And

back on the flat, the centaurs again were hooting with mocking laughter. It rolled in upon us, wave after wave of sound and out on the flat Paint built up sudden speed. He was running like a startled rabbit. When he disappeared from view, the two of us sat back and looked at one another.

"We'll soon know," I said.

"I'm afraid," said Sara, "that it won't be good. Maybe we made a mistake. You were the one to go, of course. But he wanted to, so badly."

"But why?" I asked. "Why did the poor fool want to go? Mock heroics? This is no time, I tell you . . ."

She shook her head. "Not mock heroics. Something more complicated than that. Tuck is a complex sort of person . . ."

"There's something eating on him," I said. "I'd like to know what it is."

"He doesn't think the way you and I do," she said. "He sees things differently. There is something driving him. Not a physical something. Nothing physical like fear or ambition or envy. A mystical force of some sort. I know. You've always thought he was just another religico. Another faker. One of that wandering tribe that takes on pretended religious attributes to cover up their strangeness. But I tell you he isn't. I've known him a lot longer than you have . . ."

Paint came plunging over the hilltop and, setting his rockers, skidded to a halt. Tuck, sagging in the saddle, let go of the shield and sword belt and they clattered to the ground.

Tuck sat there and stared at us, half-paralyzed.

"What about the brain case?" Sara asked. "Have they got it?"

Tuck nodded.

"Will they trade it?"

"Not trade," he croaked. "Not sell it. They will fight for it. It's the only way . . ."

"Fight for it?" I asked. "With a sword!"

"That's what they gave it to me for. I told them I came in peace and peace, they said, was coward. They wanted me to fight immediately, but I said I had to go and pray and they laughed at that, but they let me leave."

He slid off Paint and collapsed in a heap upon the ground.

"I cannot fight," he shrilled at us. "I have never fought. I have never

held a weapon in my hand until this day. I cannot kill. I refuse to kill. They said it would be fair. One of me against one of them, but . . ."

"But you couldn't fight," I said.

Sara snapped at me. "Of course he couldn't fight. He doesn't know a thing of fighting."

"Stop that sniveling," I snarled at him. "Get on your feet and get off that robe of yours."

"You!" gasped Sara.

"Who the hell else?" I asked her. "He goes out and gums up the business. It's up to me to go out and finish it. You want that brain case, don't you?"

"But you have never used a sword, have you?"

"No, of course I haven't. What do you think I am? A damned barbarian?"

Tuck hadn't stirred. I reached down and jerked him to his feet. "Off with that robe!" I yelled. "We can't keep them waiting down there."

I jerked off my shirt and began to unlace my shoes.

"The sandals, too," I said. "I'll have to look like you."

"They'll know the difference," Sara said. "You don't look the least like Tuck."

"With the hood pulled up around my face, they won't know the difference. They won't remember what he looked like. And even if they did, they wouldn't care. They have a sucker and they know it. It's a lark for them."

I stood up and peeled off my trousers. Tuck hadn't moved.

"Get that robe off him," I said to Sara. "That prayer of his can't last too long. They'll get impatient waiting for him. We don't want them to come out hunting him."

"Let's give it up," said Sara. "Let's just admit that we are licked. We can head back down the trail . . ."

"They'd come after us," I said. "We couldn't outrun them. Get that robe off him."

Sara moved toward him and Tuck suddenly came alive. He unfastened the belt and shrugged out of the robe, tossing it to me.

I put it on and cinched it around me, pulling the cowl over my head.

"You've never used a sword," said Sara. "You'll be going up against the best swordsman that they have."

"I'll have one advantage," I told her. "This man of theirs, no matter

how good he is, will be convinced he is paired off with a sissy. He'll be off guard. He may try being fancy. Or he won't try too hard. He'll be a show-off and try to make it look like play. If I can get to him . . ."

"Mike . . ."

"The sandals," I said.

Tuck kicked them toward me and I stepped into them.

He stood naked except for a dirty pair of shorts and he was the scrawniest human being I had ever seen. His stomach was so flat that it seemed to be sunk in toward his backbone and you could count every rib he owned. His arms and legs were pipestems.

I bent down to pick up the sword belt and strapped it about my waist. I took out the sword and had a look at it. It was a heavy, awkward weapon, a little rusted, not too sharp—but sharp enough. I jammed it back into the scabbard, picked up the shield and slid it on my arm.

"Good luck, Mike," said Sara.

"Thanks," I said. But I wasn't thankful. I was just burned up. This blundering fool had gone out and messed up the detail and left me a dirty job to do and, deep inside of me, I wasn't sure at all of the kind of job that I could manage.

I climbed on Paint and as the hobby turned to go, Tuck rushed over to me and stood there, in his dirty shorts, reaching up the doll to me, offering it to me.

I lashed out with my foot and struck his arm. The doll, jarred out of his grasp, went flying through the air.

Paint, turned now, went plunging up the hill and down the trail. The centaurs were still as they had been before. I had been afraid that I might meet them, streaming up the trail, coming to get Tuck.

At my appearance they sent up a mocking cheer.

We reached the flat on which the centaurs were gathered and Paint went rocketing toward them at a steady clip. One of the centaurs trotted out to meet me and Paint stopped, facing him. He had a shield, exactly like the one I carried, and a sword belt strapped around one shoulder.

"You return," he said. "We had not thought you would."

"I remain still a man of peace," I said. "Is there no other way."

"Peace be coward," he said.

"You insist?" I asked.

"There is," he said, "no other way of honor." He was mocking me.

"Speaking of honor," I said, "how do I know that when I get through killing you I will get the sphere."

"You speak most lightly of killing me," he said.

"One of us must die," I told him.

"That is true," he said, "but it will be you."

"Just on the chance that you are wrong," I insisted, "how about the sphere?"

"In the unlikely event that you still live," he said, "it will be brought to you."

"And I'll be allowed to leave in peace?"

"You insult me," he said, in cold anger. "You insult my race."

"I am a stranger here," I said. "I do not know your race."

"We are honorable," he said, the words gritted through his teeth.

"In that case," I said, "let us proceed to business."

"The rules must be observed," he said. "Each of us will move back and turn around to face each other. You note the fabric on the pole?"

I nodded. Someone in the crowd of centaurs was holding up a pole with a dirty piece of cloth tied to it.

"When the symbol falls," he said, "the fight begins."

I nodded and kicked Paint in the ribs to get him turned around. I rode a few paces, then turned Paint around again. The centaur also had turned around and we were facing one another. The pole with the dirty piece of cloth still was held on high. The centaur unsheathed his sword and I followed his example.

"Paint, old hoss," I said, "now we're in for it."

"Most honored sir," Paint told me, "I shall strive my utmost in our cause."

The pole with the dirty rag came down.

We rushed together. Paint was going full speed after the first two swings he made upon his rockers, and the centaur was thundering down upon us, his driving hoofs cutting great clots of earth out of the ground and throwing them behind him. He held his sword on high and his shield was raised above his head. As he charged toward us he let go with a strange shrill yodeling warwhoop that was enough to freeze the blood.

Not more than a couple of seconds could have elapsed between the time the flag had dropped and we were upon one another and in those two seconds (if it were two seconds) my suddenly busy mind thought of at least a dozen clever tricks by which I could outsmart my opponent, and as speedily dropped them all. In that last moment, I

knew there was nothing I could do other than try to catch the blow of his sword upon my shield and to try, by whatever means presented itself, to get in a blow of my own.

My mind dropped its wild flurry of ideas and became a hard, cold block and a grimness settled on me and I knew that this was it. I had to finish him off quickly or he would finish me and the matter of my finishing him must depend largely upon luck, for I had no skill and no time to learn the skill.

I saw his sword coming down in a full-armed swinging stroke and I knew also that my sword was swinging at his head, driven by every ounce of strength I could muster in my arm. His eyes were half-closed and beady and his face wore a look of self-satisfied alertness.

For he knew he had me. He knew I had no chance. From many little things that he had noted, he must have sensed that I was no expert swordsman and was at an utter disadvantage.

His sword struck the edge of my shield so hard that my arm was numbed and the blade went skidding off it to go slicing past my shoulder. But even as this happened, he jerked suddenly, beginning to rear up and backward. A glazed look flitted across his face and the arm that held the shield dropped away and the edge of my sword came down squarely on top his head, driven with all the strength I had, slicing into his skull and bisecting his face to drive deep into his neck.

And in that instant before my blade had struck him, when his face had taken on that glazed look and his shield arm had sagged away, I had glimpsed the black hole which blossomed in his forehead, on a line between and just above his eyes. But I saw it only for a fraction of a second, for almost as soon as it appeared, the sword was slicing through it, almost as if it had been placed there to show me where to strike.

16

The brain case was nicked and battered. It had had hard usage.

I handed it down to Sara. "There it is," I said. "That was a hell of a chance you took."

She bristled at the anger in my voice. "It was no chance at all," she said. "The bullet goes where I aim the rifle and I am good at it. It worked out, didn't it?"

"It worked out just fine," I said, still shaken. "But two feet to one side . . ."

"It couldn't have," she said. "I aimed it . . ."

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Right in the center of his forehead."

I climbed down off Paint and shucked off the robe. Tuck was crouched at the foot of one of the twisted badlands trees. I tossed the robe at him.

"Where are my pants?" I asked.

"Over there," said Sara, pointing. "I picked them up and folded them."

I picked up the trousers and shook them out and started getting into them.

Sara had been turning the brain around and around in her hand.

"What happened to it?" she asked. "What did they use it for?"

"What would you expect a bunch of polo-playing barbarians to use a brain case for?"

"You mean a polo ball."

I nodded. "Now they'll have to go back to balls chiseled out of stone. They're all upset about it."

Hoot came swarming down the slope from where he had been standing lookout.

"You perform excellent," he hooted at me. "For one wielding an unaccustomed weapon . . ."

"Miss Foster was the one who performed so excellently," I told him. "She bagged my bird for me."

"No matter which," said Hoot, "the deed be neatly done and the game-playing hobbies are evacuating."

"You mean that they are leaving?"

"They are forming up to march."

I climbed to the top of the hill and the centaurs had indeed formed into a ragged line and were marching west. It was a relief to see them go. Honorable as they might be (and they were honorable; they had given me the brain case) I still would have felt slightly nervous if they had hung around.

Turning back, I saw that Tuck and Sara had hauled Roscoe's body off the pile of water tins and were opening up his skull so they could insert the brain case.

"Do you think it has been damaged?" Sara asked. "The beating it has taken. Look at all the dents in it!"

I shook my head. I didn't know.

"He doesn't have to know too much," said Sara, hopefully. "We won't ask much of him. Just some simple questions."

Tuck held out his hand for the brain case and Sara gave it to him.

"You know how to do?" I asked Tuck.

"I think I do," he said. "There are slots. You just slip it in."

He slipped it in and slapped it with the heel of his hand to drive it home, then banged the skull plate shut.

Roscoe stirred. He had been propped against a wall of earth and now he straightened to stand upon his feet. His head swiveled about to look at each of us in turn. His arms moved tentatively, as if he might be testing them.

He spoke, his voice grating. "Whyever," he said, "wherever, however, forever, whenever."

He stopped speaking and looked around at us as if to see if we had understood him. When it must have been apparent that we hadn't, he said, solemnly and slowly, so there'd be no mistaking him this time, "Hat, cat, bat, fat, rat, sat, vat, pat, gnat, gat, drat, tat."

"He's completely nuts," I said.

"Guts," said Roscoe.

"He rhymes," said Sara. "That is all he does–just a rhyming

dictionary. Do you suppose he's forgotten everything? Do you think he knows anything at all?"

I grinned at her. "Why don't you ask him?"

"Roscoe," said Sara, "do you remember anything at all?"

"Tall," said Roscoe, "call, ball, mall, fall, gall."

"No, no," said Sara, "do you remember your master?"

"Pastor," said Roscoe, maddeningly conversational.

"Oh, it's no use!" cried Sara. "All the way we traveled, all the trouble we've been through and you down there risking your neck and all we get is this!"

"Roscoe," I said sharply, "we are looking for Lawrence Arlen Knight . . ."

"Kite," said Roscoe, "sight, night, blight . . ."

"No, goddamn it!" I shouted. "We are looking for him. Point in the direction we should look."

"Book," said Roscoe, "cook, took." But even as he mouthed his rhyming gibberish, he squared around and flung out his arm, with a finger pointing, holding his arm and finger rigid, like a steady sign board, pointing northward up the trail.

17

So we went on, northward, up the trail.

We left the desert and the badlands behind us and climbed steadily for days up a high plateau, while ahead of us the mountains steadily climbed higher in the sky, great, mystic, majestic ramparts that still were touched with the blue of distance.

There was water now, flowing streams of it that ran cold and musically along the pebbled beds. We cached our water tins in one of the stone beehive huts that still sprouted, at intervals, along the trail.

Since the badlands none of us carried packs; the packs we had carried were strapped on Roscoe's sturdy back. Feeling a bit sheepish about it, I traveled with the shield slung behind my shoulders and the sword buckled to my waist. It was no kind of fighting equipment for a grown man to carry, but there was in that shield and sword a certain swashbuckling feeling of importance—a throwback to some old ancestor of millennia ago who had taken pride in a warrior's outfit.

We marched, it seemed, with more purpose now. While at times I doubted that Roscoe had known what was going on when he had pointed north (and continued to point north each time we asked him), his seeming confidence gave us at least a feeling of assurance that we no longer were fumbling blindly, but had a track to follow.

The vegetation increased. There was grass and flowering plants, a vast variety of shrubs, and at times groves of stately trees along some of the water courses. And always, of course, the sky-scraping trees that towered far into the distance. The air grew chilly and where there had been no wind, there now was wind, blowing with a knife-edge bite. Rodentlike creatures abounded, sitting up and whistling at us as we passed, and occasionally small herds of herbivores. Sara shot one of these and we butchered it and drew straws to see who would be the guinea pig. The long straw fell to me and I ate a few bites of the steak we fried, then sat back to wait. Nothing happened and all of us ate. We had found a food supply and could hoard the little stock we carried.

There was about this high land an ecstatic mysticism and at times I found myself feeling that I was walking through a dream. It was not this high plateau itself, but the total impact of the planet that seemed to come crashing down upon me—the wonder of who had been here before and why they'd left and what might be the purpose of the orchard they had planted and then abandoned, along with the great white city. Huddling close to the campfire, grateful for its warmth against the chill of night, I watched Hoot and wondered at the brotherhood that lay between us, binding us together. He had cleaned my blood of poison and had later asked me for a loan of life and when Tuck had snatched him from me had accepted the loan from Tuck, although I suspected it had been taken as a proxy of my life, for between him and Tuck there was no such thing as brotherhood.

Now, more than ever, Tuck walked by himself, no longer even pretending that he was one of us. He almost never spoke except on those occasions when he mumbled to the doll and once the evening

meal was done sat by himself away from the fire, apparently unmindful of the cold. His face became thinner and his body seemed to shrink within the muffling folds of his robe, shrinking not into a skeleton, but into tough rawhide. He took on a gray quality, a shadow sense, so that one became unaware of him. There were times when I'd look around and see him and be surprised to find him there and even wonder, momentarily, who he was, and that strange wiping-out-of-memory was, as well, a part of this high blue land through which we walked. Past and present and the thought and hope of future would seem to blend into a terribly logic feel of time that was in itself eternity, a never-beginning never-ending state of being that hung suspended in duration and yet had about it a continuing and a sparkling sense of wonder.

So we moved across that great plateau, Paint rocking along in silence except for the occasional click of a rocker against a stone protruding from the trail; Hoot ranging out ahead, a dot against the distance, still working at his scarcely-needed role of scout; Tuck stumbling along like a dim gray ghost muffled to the throat in brown, and Roscoe stumping sturdily, muttering to himself his endless string of rhyming words, never making sense, a vocal moron who trundled happily through an alien never-never land. And I, stalking along with the shield upon my back and the sword banging at my leg, must have appeared as strange as any of the rest. Sara probably was touched the least of all, but she changed as well, regaining the old flare of adventure which had been sheared from her by the toil and monotony and the tension of crossing the desert with its badlands stretches. I saw in her again the women who had met me in the hallway of that aristocratic house in the midst of its sweeping lawn and who had walked with me, arm in arm, into that room where it all had started.

The mountains loomed higher and lost some of their blueness and we could see now that they were wild and fearsome and breathtaking mountains, with soaring cliffs and mighty canyons, clothed with heavy woods that extended almost to the rocky peaks.

"I have a feeling," Sara said one night as we sat beside the campfire, "that we are nearly there, that we are getting close."

I nodded, for I had the same feeling—that we were getting close, although I could not imagine close to what. Somewhere in those mountains just ahead we would find what we were looking for. I did not think that we would find Lawrence Arlen Knight, for he must long since be dead, but in some strange manner for which I could not

account, the conviction had crept into me that we'd find something, that somewhere this trail must end and that at the end of it lay the thing we sought. Although I could not, for the life of me, put into words the sort of thing we sought. I simply did not know. But not knowing did not suppress the excitement and anticipation of what lay just ahead. It was all illogical, of course, an attitude born of the mystic blue through which we journeyed. More than likely the trail would never end, that once it reached the mountains it would continue to go snaking up and around and through that upended country. But logic had no place here. I still continued to believe that the trail would end somewhere just ahead and that at the end of it we'd find something wonderful.

Above us lay the glow of the galaxy—the fierce blue-whiteness of the central core, with the filmy mistiness of the arms spiraling out from it.

"I wonder," Sara said, "if we ever will get back. And if we do get back, what can we tell them, Mike? How is one going to put into words the kind of place this is?"

"A great white city," I said, "and then the desert and after that the highlands and beyond the highlands mountains."

"But that doesn't tell it. That doesn't begin to tell it. The wonder and the mysticism . . ."

"There are never words," I told her, "for the wonder and the glory, never words for fear or happiness."

"I suppose you're right," she said. "But do you suppose we will get back? Have you any idea of how we can get back?"

I shook my head. I had one idea, but it might be a very bad one and there was no use in telling it, there was no use in giving rise to hope that had only a fraction of a chance of ever coming true.

"You know," she said, "I don't really care. It doesn't seem to matter too much. There is something here that I've found nowhere else and I can't tell you what it is. I've thought and thought about it and I still don't know what it is."

"Another day or two," I said, "and we may find what it is."

For I was under the spell as well as she, although perhaps not so completely under it. She may have been more sensitive than I, she may have seen things that I had missed, or placed different interpretations upon certain impressions that both of us had experienced. There was no way, I realized, that any one person might hope to realize or understand, or even guess, how another person's mind would operate,

what impressions it might hold and how those impressions might be formed and how they might be interpreted or what impact the interpretation might have upon the intellect and senses of the owner of the brain.

"Tomorrow, maybe," she said.

And, yes, I thought, tomorrow. It might be tomorrow.

I looked at her across the fire and she had the appearance of a child who was saying, not being sure at all, that tomorrow might be Christmas.

But tomorrow was not trail's end, not Christmas. It turned out to be the day that Tuck disappeared.

We became aware that he was not with us in the middle of the afternoon and, try as we might, we could not recall if he'd been with us at the noonday stop. We were certain that he had started with us in the morning, but that was the only thing of which we could be certain.

We stopped and backtracked. We searched and yelled, but got no response. Finally, as evening fell, we set up camp.

It was ridiculous, of course, that none of us could remember when we had seen him last and I wondered, as I thought of it, whether he had actually left us, wandering off either intentionally or by accident, or if perhaps he had simply faded away, as George may have faded away that night when we were penned by the bombardment of the tree in the red-stone structure at the city's edge. It was the growing grayness of the man, I told myself, that had made it possible for us not to miss him. Day by day he had grown more distant and less approachable, had progressively effaced himself until he moved among us as a ghost would have moved, only half-seen. The growing grayness of the man and the half-sensed enchantment of this blue land through which we made our way, where time ceased to have a great deal of sense or function and one traveled as if he were walking in a dream—these two factors, teamed together, had made his disappearance, I told myself, quite possible.

"There is no point in looking for him anymore," said Sara. "If he had been here, we would have found him. If he had been present, he would have answered us."

"You don't think that he is present?" I asked, thinking that it was a strange way of saying he was not around.

She shook her head. "He found what he was looking for. Just the way George found what he was looking for."

"That doll of his," I said.

"A symbol," Sara said. "A point of concentration. Like a crystal ball in which one can lose himself. A madonna of some ancient and effective religious belief. A talisman . . ."

"A madonna," I said. "You mentioned that before."

"Tuck was sensitive," said Sara, "down to his fingertips. In tune, somehow, with something outside our space-time reference. An offensive sort of man—yes, I'll admit that now—an offensive sort of man, and different in a very special way. Not entirely of this world."

"You told me once he wouldn't make it," I said, "that somewhere along the way he would break up."

"I know I did. I thought that he was weak, but he wasn't. He was strong."

Standing there, I wondered where he had gone. Or was he gone at all? Had his grayness progressed to a point where he simply disappeared? Was he still with us, unseen and unsuspected, stumbling along at the edge of a twilight world into which we could not see? Was he out there even now, calling to us or plucking at our sleeves to let us know that he still was with us, and we unable to hear him or to feel the plucking? But that, I told myself, could not be the case. Tuck would not pluck or call. He wouldn't care; he wouldn't give a damn. He would not care if we knew he was there or did not know. All he needed was the doll to clutch against his chest and the lonely thoughts that jangled in his skull. Perhaps his disappearance had not been so much a disappearance as a growing grayness, as his utter and absolute rejection of us.

"You now be only two," said Hoot, "but strong allies travel with you. The other three of us still stand fast with you."

I had forgotten Hoot and the other two and for a moment it had seemed, in truth, there were only two of us, two of the four who had come storming up out of the galaxy to seek in its outland fringes a thing we could not know—and even now did not know.

"Hoot," I said, "you sensed George leaving us. You knew when he left. This time . . ."

"I did not hear him go," said Hoot. "He gone long back, days back. He fade away so easily there be no sense of leaving. He just grow less and less."

And that was the answer, of course. He'd just got less and less. I wondered if there had ever been a time when he'd been wholly with us.

Sara was standing close behind me, with her head held high, as if she

might somehow be defiant of something out there in the gathering dark—the thing, perhaps, or the condition, or the interlocking of circumstances which had taken Tuck from us. Although it was hard to believe that there was any single thing or any specific set of circumstances involved. The answer must lie inside of Tuck and the kind of mind he had.

In the light of the campfire I saw that tears were running down her cheeks, weeping silently, with her head held high against whatever might be out there in the dark. I reached out a tentative hand and put it on her shoulder and at the touch she turned toward me and I had her in my arms—without planning to, surprised that it should happen—with her head buried in my shoulder and now sobs were shaking her while I held her close and fast against myself.

Out by the campfire stood Roscoe, stolid, unmoving, and in the silences punctuated by Sara's sobbing, I heard his whispered mumbling: "Thing, bring, cling, sting, wing, fling . . ."

18

We arrived the second morning after Tuck had disappeared—arrived and knew that we were there, that we had reached the place we had struggled to reach all the endless days that stretched behind us. There was no great elation in us when we topped a little rise of ground and saw across a swale the gateway where the trail plunged downward between two great cliffs and recognized that here was the gateway to the place we had set out to reach.

Beyond us the mountains climbed up into the sky—those mountains which back at the city had first appeared as a purple smudge which could be seen fleetingly on the northern horizon. And the purple still remained, reflecting a dusk upon the blue land through which we had

been traveling. It all felt so exactly right—the mountains, the gate, the feeling of having arrived—that I seemed to sense a wrongness in it, but try as I might I could not tell why there was a wrongness.

"Hoot," I said, but he did not answer. He was standing there beside us, as motionless and quiet as we were. To him it must have seemed entirely right as well.

"Shall we go?" asked Sara, and we went, stepping down the trail toward the great stone portals which opened on the mountains.

When we reached the gate formed by the towering cliffs between which the trail went on, we found the sign. It was made of metal, affixed to one of the cliff walls, and there were a dozen or more paneled legends that apparently carried identical information in different languages. One was in the bastard script that went with space patois and it said:

All Biological Creatures Welcome. Mechanicals, Synthetic Forms, Elementals of Any Persuasions Whatsoever Cannot Be Allowed to Enter. Nor May Any Tools or Weapons, of Even the Simplest Sort, Be Allowed Beyond This Point.

"I care not," said Paint. "I keep goodly company of great lumbering mumbler of rhyming words. And I watch most assiduously over rifle, sword, and shield. I pray you not be long, for following extended sojourn upon my back I shiver from apprehension at absence of biologic persons. There be strange comfort in the actual protoplasm."

"I don't like it," I said. "We'll be walking naked down that path."

"This," Sara reminded me, "is what we started out to find. We can't quibble at a simple regulation. And it'll be safe in there. I can feel it. Can't you feel the safety, Mike?"

"Sure I can feel it," I told her, "but I still don't like it. The way you feel is no sure thing to go on. We don't know what we'll find. We don't know what is waiting for us. What say we pay no attention to the sign and . . ."

"BEEP," said the sign, or the cliff, or whatever.

I swung around and there, on the panel where the regulations had been posted, was another message:

The Management Will Not Be Responsible for the Consequences of Willful Disregarding of Regulations.

"All right, Buster," I asked, "what kind of consequences do you have in mind?"

The panel didn't deign to answer; the message just stayed put.

"I don't care what you do," said Sara. "I am going on. And I'm doing what they say. I didn't come all this way to turn back now."

"Who said anything about turning back?" I asked.

BEEP, said the panel and there was another message:

Don't Try It, Buster!

Sara leaned the rifle against the wall of the cliff underneath the sign, unfastened the cartridge belt and dropped it at the rifle's butt.

"Come on, Hoot," she said.

BEEP, and the panel said:

The Many-Legged One? Is It a True Biologic?

Hoot honked with anger. "Know it you do, Buster. I be honest hatched!"

BEEP!

But You Are More Than One.

"I be three," said Hoot, with dignity. "I be now a second self. Much preferable to first self and unready yet for third."

The sign flashed off and there was a sense of someone or something pondering. You could feel the pondering.

BEEP! and the panel said:

Proceed, Sir, With Our Apology.

Sara turned around and looked at me. "Well?" she asked.

I threw the shield down beside the rifle and unbuckled the sword belt and let it fall.

Sara led the way and I let her lead it. It was, after all, her show; this was what she'd paid for. Hoot ambled along at her heels and I brought up the rear.

We went down the trail in a deepening dusk as the towering walls of stone shut out the light. We moved at the bottom of a trench that was less than three feet wide. Then the trench and trail took a sudden turn and ahead was light.

We left the towering walls and the narrow trail and came into the Promised Land.

19

It was a place out of the ancient Greece I had read about in school, the instructor trying to inspire in us some feeling for the history and the culture of the planet of mankind's first beginning. And while I had not cared at all about that distant planet nor the factors concerned with the rise of Man, I had been struck by the classical beauty of the Grecian concept. It had struck me at the time as a heritage in which any race could take a certain pride and then I'd forgotten it and not thought of it for years. But now here, at last, it was, just as I had imagined it when I had read that textbook many years ago.

The trail continued through a rugged, rock-bound valley with a small and rapid mountain stream running through it, flashing in the sun where its waters tumbled down the sharp inclines of its boulder-strewn bed. The landscape itself was harsh and barren, mostly rocky surfaces, but here and there a patch of green with twisted, weather-beaten trees thrusting from the crevasses in the rocky slopes. The trail led down the valley, sometimes close beside the stream, sometimes twisting sharply to negotiate a spur of rocky headland that came close down against the stream. And perched here and there along the rugged, rock-bound slopes that hung above the valley were tiny villas built of gleaming marble—or at least it looked from where we stood like marble—all designed in the clean, clear-cut lines of Grecian architecture.

Even the sun seemed to be the sun of Greece, or the sun of Greece as I had imagined it to be. Gone was the blueness of the great plateau we had climbed to reach the mountains, gone the purple of the mountains; in their place was the pure, hard sunlight, white sunlight, beating down upon an arid land that was all angular and harsh.

This was it—the place we'd hunted for, not knowing what we hunted

for, thinking, perhaps, it might be a man or a thing or simply an idea. Hunting blind. Although it might be, after all, a man, for here in this valley we might find, if not the man himself, perhaps the grave or at least some indication of what had happened to that legended man of space.

For looking at this rugged valley, I had no doubt at all that the trail we had followed had had no other purpose than to lead us here—not us alone, of course, but any who might follow it.

None of us had spoken when we'd come out of the notch into the Grecian sunlight. There was actually nothing one might say. And now Sara started down the path and Hoot and I followed on behind her.

We came to a path that lunged upward toward the first of the villas perched on the rocky hillside that rose above the stream and beside the path was a post with a sign affixed to it, bearing a line of script that we could not read.

Sara stopped.

"A nameplate?" she asked, looking at me.

I nodded. It could be a nameplate, the name of some creature that lived in the villa perched there on the hillside.

But if it were a nameplate, there was no sign of the one who lived up there in the villa. There was, in fact, no sign of any life at all. Nothing stirred to mar the smooth placidity of the valley. No one peeked out at us. No creature of the air flew overhead. There was no shrilling sound of insects or the equivalent of insects. For all the signs we saw, for all we heard, we might be the only life there was.

"It makes sense," said Sara, "that it should be a nameplate."

"Let's pretend it is," I said. "Let's proceed and look for one that says Lawrence Arlen Knight."

"Even now," she said, "can't you be serious about it? You said we'd never find him. You said he was just a story. You said he would be dead . . ."

"Don't look at me," I told her. "I could be wrong. I don't think I am, but there is nothing that makes sense anymore. This was your idea . . ."

"And you were against it from the start."

"Not against it," I said. "Just not a true believer."

"We've come all this way," she said, almost plaintively.

"Sara," I said, "so help me, I don't know. Let's just go ahead and keep an eye on the signs."

We went ahead, plunging down the inclines, toiling up the slopes.

There were other villas and other signs, each of them in different alphabets, if some of them in fact could be called alphabets, and none that we could read.

The sun beat down, a liquid flood that shattered off the stones and sparkled off the water. Except for the bubble and the chuckle of the water, the silence held. There was nothing stirring.

And then another sign in solid block letters that we could read:

LAWRENCE ARLEN KNIGHT

It was all insane, of course. You did not cross a galaxy to find a man—and find him. You did not find a man who should have years ago been dead. You did not trace a legend to its end. But there it was, the sign that said Lawrence Arlen Knight.

And then, as I stood there, the thought crossed my mind—not the home of, but the grave of; not a villa, but a tomb.

"Sara," I said, but already she was scrambling up the path, sobbing in excitement and relief, all the tension of the long search resolved at last.

And coming out on the porch of that white-shining structure was a man—an old man, but a man still hale, snow-white hair and beard, but with shoulders still unstooped, with his stride still steady. He was dressed in a white toga, and that was no surprise at all. With a setup such as this he could have worn nothing but a toga.

"Sara!" I cried, scrambling after her, with Hoot close upon my heels.

She didn't hear. She paid me no attention.

And now the old man was speaking. "Visitors!" he said, holding out his hand. "My own people! I never thought I'd lay eyes on such again."

The sound of that voice swept all my doubts away. Here was no illusion, no apparition, no magic. Here was a man, a human, the voice deep and somber, filled with human gladness at the sight of fellowmen.

Sara held out her hands and the old man grasped them and the two of them stood there, looking into one another's eyes.

"It's been long," the old man said. "Too long. The trail is far, the way is hard and no one knew. You—how did you know?"

"Sir," said Sara, still gasping from her climb, "you are—you must be Lawrence Arlen Knight."

"Why, yes," he said, "of course I am. Who did you expect?"

"Expect?" said Sara. "You, of course. But we could only hope."

"And these good people with you?"

"Captain Michael Ross," said Sara, "and Hoot, a good friend met along the way."

Knight bowed to Hoot. "Your servant, sir," he said. Then he reached out a hand to me, grasping my hand in a warm, hard grip. In that moment, when there were other more important things to note, I could only see that his hand, despite the firmness of the grip, was an old and wrinkled hand, blotched with liver spots.

"Captain Ross," he said, "you are welcome. There are places here for you, for all of you. And this young lady–I do not have your name."

"Sara Foster," Sara said.

"To think," he said, "that no longer need I be alone. Wonderful as it all has been, I have missed the sound of human voices and the sight of human faces. There are many others here, creatures of great character and fine sensitivity, but one never quite outgrows the need of his own species."

"How long have you been here?" I asked, trying to figure in my mind how far back the legend of this man might run.

"When a man lives each day to the full," he told me, "and with the close of one day looks forward to the next, there is no counting of one's time. Each day, each minute becomes a part of all eternity. I have thought about it and I am not sure there is such a thing as time. It is an abstract concept, a crude measuring device, a perspective structure built up by certain intelligences, and by no means all of them, because they feel a need to place themselves into what they call a space-time framework. Time as such is lost in foreverness and there is no need to search for beginning or for end because they never did exist and under a situation such as here exists the meticulous measuring of ridiculously small slices of eternity becomes a task that has no meaning in it. Not, I must make haste to say, that one can slice eternity . . ."

He went on and on and I wondered, looking off across the valley from where I stood on the marble-columned porch, if he were unbalanced by his loneliness, or he might know some part of what he said. For this place, this valley that sprang out of nowhere, did have a look of eternity about it. Although as I thought this, I wondered how any man might know how eternity would look–but be that as it may, there was a feel of the unchanging in this place of bright white sunlight.

"But I ramble on," the old man was saying. "The trouble is I have too much to say, too much stored up to say. Although there is no reason why I should try to say it all at once. I apologize for keeping you out here, standing. Won't you please come in."

We stepped through the open doorway into quiet and classic elegance.

There were no windows, but from somewhere in the roof the sunlight came slanting in, to highlight with a classic brilliance the chairs and sofa, the writing desk with a small wooden chest and scattered sheets of paper on its top, the polished tea service on the smaller table in one corner.

"Please," he said, "have chairs. I hope that you can spend some time with me." (And there, I thought, he talked of time when he had said there might be no such thing as time.) "And that is foolish of me, of course, for you have the time. You hold in the hollow of your hand all the time there is. Having gotten here, there is no place else to go, no place else that you would care to go. Once one gets here, he never wants to leave, never needs to leave."

It was all too sleek and smooth, too much like a play, well-written, and yet there was nothing wrong with it—just an old and lonely man with the gates of suppressed talk unlatched by the unexpected appearance of people of his race. Yet, underneath it all, underneath my own acceptance of this place and of this man (for here were both of them), I felt a prickling uneasiness.

"There are places here for you, of course," he said. "There are always places waiting. Very few ever win their way here and there is always room. In another day or two I'll take you around and we'll call upon the others. Very formal calls, for we are formal here. But the thing about it, the best thing, is that once protocol has been observed, you need not call again, although you may find some of them you'll want to visit now and then. Here dwells a select company called from all the stars and some may be amusing and others you will find instructive and there will be much that they do, I must warn you, you will not understand. And some of it you may find disturbing and disgusting. Which need not perturb you in the slightest, for each one keeps his counsel and his place and . . ."

"What is this place?" asked Sara. "How did you hear of it? How did you . . ."

"What is this place?" he asked, with a muffled gasp.

"Yes, what is this place? What do you call it?"

"Why," he said, "I've never even wondered. I've never thought of it. I have never asked."

"You mean," I said, "that you have been here all this time and you've never wondered where you were?"

He looked at me aghast, as if I had committed some unwitting heresy.

"What would be the need to ask?" he said. "What the need to wonder? Would it make any difference if it had a name or did not have a name?"

"We are sorry," Sara said. "We are new here. We did not mean to upset you."

And that was all right for her to say, but I had meant to upset him and in the process perhaps jar some sense from him. If this were a nameless place I wanted, illogically perhaps, to know why it had no name and, even more, how it had come about he had never asked the name.

"You said the days were full," I said. "Exactly how do you fill them? How do you pass the time?"

"Mike!" said Sara sharply.

"I want to know," I said. "Does he sit and contemplate his navel. Does he . . ."

"I write," said Lawrence Arlen Knight.

"Sir," said Sara, "I apologize. This cross-examination is bad manners."

"Not for me," I told her. "I am the roughneck type who wants to get some answers. He says no one who gets here ever wants to leave. He said the days are full. If we are to be stuck here, I want to know . . ."

"Each one," Knight said softly, "does what he wants to do. He does it for the sheer joy that he finds in the doing of it. He has no motive other than the satisfaction of doing very well either the thing he wants to do or the thing he does the best. There is no economic pressure and no social pressure. He does not work for praise or money or for fame. Here one realizes how empty all those motives are. He remains true only to himself."

"And you write?"

"I write," said Knight.

"What do you write?"

"The things I want to write. The thoughts inside myself. I try to express them as best I can. I write and rewrite them. I polish them. I seek the exact word and phrase. I try to put down the total experience of my life. I try to see what kind of creature I am and why I am the way I am and try to extend . . ."

"And how are you getting along?" I asked.

He gestured at the wooden box upon the table. "It is all there," he said. "The bare beginning of it. It has taken long, but it is a task I never

tire of. It will take much longer to finish it, if I ever finish it. Although that is silly of me to say, for I have all the time there is. Others may paint, still others compose music, others play it. Or many other things, of which I had never heard before. One of my near neighbors, a most peculiar creature if I may say so, is making up a most complicated game, played with many sets of pieces and many different counters on a board that is three dimensional and, at times, I suspect it may be four, and . . ."

"Stop it!" Sara cried. "Stop it! You need not explain yourself to us."

She shriveled me with a look.

"I do not mind," said Lawrence Arlen Knight. "In fact, I think I may enjoy it. There is so much to tell, so much that is so wondrous. I can quite understand how someone coming here might be puzzled and might have many questions he would want to ask. It is a difficult thing to absorb."

"Mike," said Hoot.

"Hush," said Sara.

"Difficult," said Knight. "Yes, very difficult. Hard to understand that here time stands still and that except for the going and the coming of the light, which fools us into measuring time into artificial days, there is no such thing as time. To realize that yesterday is one with today and that tomorrow is, as well, one with yesterday, that one walks in an unchanging lake of foreverness and that there is no change, that here one can escape the tyranny of time and . . ."

Hoot honked loudly at me: "Mike!"

Sara came to her feet and so did I and as I rose, the place changed—the place and man.

I stood in a hovel with a broken roof and dirt floor. The chairs were rickety and the table, lacking one leg, was propped against the wall. On it stood the wooden box and the litter of papers.

"It is beyond human experience," said Knight. "It is, indeed, beyond human imagination. I sometimes wonder if someone in some distant age, by some process which I cannot even begin to understand, caught a glimpse and the meaning of this place and called it Heaven . . ."

He was old. He was incredibly old and filthy, a walking corpse. The skin was drawn tight over his cheekbones and pulled back from his lips, revealing yellowed, rotting teeth. Through a great rent in his robe, caked with filth, his ribs stood out like those of a winter-starved horse. His hands were claws. His beard was matted with dirt and drool and his

hooded eyes gleamed with a vacant light, eyes half-dead and yet somehow sharp, too sharp to be housed in such an ancient, tottering body.

"Sara," I shouted.

For she was standing in complete and polite absorption, listening ecstatically to the words mouthed by the filthy old wreck who sat huddled in his chair.

She whirled on me. "For the last time, Mike . . ."

By the look of cold fury on her face, I knew that she still saw him as he had appeared before, that the change was not apparent to her, that she still was trapped in whatever enchantment had ensnared us.

I moved fast, scarcely thinking. I clipped her on the chin, hard and accurately and without pity, and I caught her as she fell. I slung her over my shoulder and as I did I saw that Knight was struggling to push himself out of the chair and even as he continued his efforts, his mouth kept moving and he never stopped his talk.

"What is the trouble, my friends?" he asked. "Have I done some unwitting thing to offend you? It is so hard at times to know and appreciate the mores of the people that one meets. It is easy to perform one misguided act or say one unguarded word . . ."

I turned to go and as I did I saw that wooden box on the table top and reached out to grab it.

Hoot was pleading with me. "Mike, delay do not. Stand not on ceremony. Flee, please, with all alacrity."

We fled with all alacrity.

20

We made good time, not looking back. I did look back, for an instant only, before we plunged into the canyonlike cleft between the soaring rocks that led back to the gateway.

Sara came to and screamed at me, kicking and beating at my back with clenched fists, but I hung tightly to her with one arm, holding her against my shoulder. In the other arm, I clutched the wooden box I had lifted from the table.

Still running, we reached the end of the canyon. Roscoe and Paint stood exactly as we had left them. Sara's rifle leaned against the rocky wall and my sword and shield lay beside them.

I dumped Sara on the ground with no ceremony. I had taken quite a beating from her flailing feet and fists, and was not feeling exactly kindly toward her and was glad to be rid of her.

She landed on her rump and stayed sitting there, looking up at me, her face white with fury, her jaws working, but so sore at me that she could form no word but one. "You—you—you," she kept saying. It was probably the first time in her money-buttressed life that anyone had laid violent and disrespectful hands upon her.

I stood there, looking down at her, blown with my mad, frantic running up the valley and through the canyon, gulping air, weak in the knees, sore in the back and belly, where she had hammered me—and thinking of that one backward look I'd taken before I'd plunged into the canyon.

"You hit me!" she finally said, screaming in her outrage.

She said it and waited for my answer. But I had no answer. I had no answer in my mind and no breath to speak an answer. I don't know what she expected as an answer. Maybe she was hoping I'd deny it, so that she could berate me not only as a bully, but a liar, too.

"You hit me!" she screamed again.

"You're damned right I did," I said. "You didn't see a thing. You would have argued with me. There was nothing else to do."

She leaped to her feet and confronted me. "We found Lawrence Arlen Knight," she yelled. "We found a wonderful, shining place. After all our traveling, we found what we set out to find and then . . ."

Hoot said, "Gracious lady, the fault belongs on me. I sensed it with the edges of my third self and I made Mike to see. Strength I did not have to make more than one of you to see. Not the second one. And I made Mike to see . . ."

She whirled on him. "You filthy beast!" she cried. She lashed out with her foot. The kick caught him in the side and bowled him over. He lay there, his tiny feet working like little pistons, trying frantically to right himself.

Then, swiftly, she was on her knees beside him. "Hoot," she cried, "I'm sorry. Can you believe me, I am sorry. I am sorry and ashamed." She set him on his feet.

She looked up at me. "Mike! Oh, Mike! What has happened to us?"

"Enchantment," I said. "It's the only thing I can think of that would cover it. Enchantment happened to us."

"Kindly one," Hoot said to her, "resentment I do not bear. Reaction of the foot was a natural one, I quite understand."

"Stand," said Roscoe, "band, grand, sand."

"Shut up," said Old Paint, gruffly. "You'll drive us nuts with that gibberish."

"It was all illusion," I told her. "There were no marble villas. There were only filthy huts. The stream did not run free and shining; it was clogged with garbage from those huts. There was a terrible smell to it that caught you in the throat. And Lawrence Arlen Knight, if that is who he was, was a walking corpse kept alive by God knows what alchemy."

"Wanted here we're not," said Hoot.

"We are trespassers," I said. "Once here we can't go back to space because no one must know about this planet. We're caught in a big fly trap. Once we came near we were tolled in to a landing by the signal. And finally we chased a myth and that myth was another fly trap—a trap within a trap."

"But Lawrence Arlen Knight chased the myth back in the galaxy."

"And so did we," I said. "So did the humanoids who left their bones

back in the gully. In some insect traps certain scents and odors are used to attract the insects, even from far off. And in many cases the scents and odors drift on the winds to very distant places. Read, instead of scent and odor, myth and legend . . ."

"But that man back there," she said, "was happy and contented and so full of life and plans. His days were busy days and full. Knight or not, he was sure he'd reached the place that he had hunted."

"What simpler way," I asked, "to keep a life form where you want it than to make it happy where you put it?"

"You are sure?" she asked. "Sure of what you saw? Hoot could not have fooled you?"

"Fool him I did not," said Hoot. "I make him see it straight."

"But what difference would it make?" she asked. "If he is happy there. If he has purpose there. If life is meaningful and there is no such thing as time to rob it of its meaning . . ."

"You mean we could have stayed?"

She nodded. "He said there was a place for us. That there are always places. We could have settled down. We could have . . ."

"Sara," I asked, "is that what you really want? To settle down in imagined happiness? Never to go back to Earth?"

She started to speak, then hesitated.

"You know damn well," I said, "it isn't. Back on Earth you have this house filled with hides and heads, with trophies of the hunt. The great huntress. The killer of the vicious life forms of the galaxy. They gave you social status, they made you a glamor figure. But there were too many of them. People began to yawn at them. They were getting bored with your adventures. So to keep on being glamorous, you had to hunt a different game . . ."

She leaped to her feet and her hand swung in a vicious arc and caught me in the face.

I grinned at her. "We're even now," I said.

21

We turned back, traveling down the trail that we had used in coming, back across that great blue land of high plateau, with the purple mountains looming up behind us.

I had expected Sara to raise a fuss about it. I was not sure that she believed what I had told her; how could she? All she had was my word for it and I was not certain how much reliance she would put upon my word. She had seen none of what I'd seen. So far as she was concerned, the valley still was a shining place, with a flashing stream and bright white sunlight, with the marble villas still perched among the crags. If she were to go back, I was sure, it would all be there for her, unchanged. The enchantment still was working for her.

We had no plans. We had no place to go. Certainly there was no incentive to reach the desert we had crossed. The great white city had no attraction for us. I don't know what Hoot or Sara might have been thinking. I know that for myself the only thought was to build up some distance between ourselves and that gateway to the valley.

I had forgotten the blueness of the high plateau with its mossy hummocks, its thickets of sweet-smelling shrubs, the icy rills and, towering in every direction, the trees that reached miles into the sky. If one looked for a reason why this planet should be closed, or was intended to be closed, I felt that one must look toward those towering trees. For they were clearly the handiwork of another intelligence. Trees, seeding naturally, do not grow in a grid arrangement, each one exactly so far from its nearest neighbor. One tended to become accustomed to them after a time, but this was only, I was well aware, because the mind, tired of fruitless speculation, turned them off, rejecting them as a way of preserving itself against the devastating question mark of wonder written by the trees.

That night, beside the campfire, we tried to put into perspective the situation which confronted us.

There seemed no hope we could get into the spaceship which stood on the field in the center of the city. At least two dozen other ships also stood upon the field. In all the years they'd stood there others must have tried to crack them, but there was no evidence they had.

And what had happened to those other people, those other creatures, that had ridden in the ships? We knew, of course, what had happened to the humanoids whose skeletons we'd found in the gully. We could speculate that the centaurs might be retrogressed out-planet creatures which centuries ago had landed on the field. The planet was large, with more land surface than the Earth, and there was plenty of space in which other stranded travelers might have found a living niche and settled down. Some of them might be living in the city, although that seemed doubtful because of the killing vibrations which swept the city whenever a ship should land. And there was, as well, the consideration that many expeditions might have consisted only of male members of a species, which would mean there'd be no continuation. Marooned, they'd simply die and that would be the end of it.

"There's one more possibility," said Sara. "Some of them may be back there in the valley. We know that Knight made it. Some of the others, perhaps many of the others, might have made it, too."

I nodded, agreeing with her. It was the final trap. If a visitor did not perish in reaching it, then there was the valley. Once in it, no one would get out. It was the perfect trap in that no one would ever want to leave it. Although there could be no certainty that all of those who'd come here had come seeking what Lawrence Arlen Knight had sought—and what we had sought. They might have come for reasons quite unknown to us.

"You are sure," asked Sara, "that you really saw what you say you saw?"

"I don't know what I can do," I told her, "to make you believe me. Do you think I threw it all away? To spite you, maybe? Don't you think I might have been a little happy, too? Maybe, being a suspicious sort of clown, not as happy as you were, but after all those miles . . ."

"Yes, of course," she said. "You had no reason to. But why you alone? Why not me? I did not see these things."

"Hoot explained all that," I told her. "He could alert only one of us. And he alerted me . . ."

"A part of me is Mike," said Hoot. "We owe one another life. A bond there is between us. His mind is always with me. We be almost one."

"One," said Roscoe solemnly, "done, fun, gun . . ."

"Cease your clack," said Paint. "No sense at all you make."

"Fake," said Roscoe.

"The almost human one," said Hoot, "tries to talk with us."

"His brain is addled," I said. "That's what is wrong with him. The centaurs . . ."

"No," said Hoot. "He attempts communication."

I hunched around and stared up at Roscoe. He stood straight and rigid, the flare of firelight on his metal hide. And I remembered how, back there in the badlands, when we had asked a question, he had signaled that we should travel north. Did he, in fact, still understand? Was there something he could tell us if he could put it into words?

I said to Hoot, "Can you dig it out of him?"

"It beyond my power," said Hoot.

"Don't you understand," Sara said to me, "that there is no use trying. We're not going to get back to Earth. Or anywhere. We are staying on this planet."

"There is one thing we could try," I said.

"I know," she said. "I thought of it, too. The other worlds. The worlds like the sand dune world. There must be hundreds of them."

"Out of all those hundreds, there might be . . ."

She shook her head. "You underestimate the people who built the city and set out the trees. They knew what they were doing. Every one of those worlds would be as isolated as this world. Those worlds were chosen for a purpose . . ."

"Have you ever thought," I argued, "that one of them might be the home planet of the folks who built the city?"

"No, I never have," she said. "But what difference would it make? They'd squash you like a bug."

"Then what do we do?" I asked.

"I could go back to the valley," she said. "I didn't see what you saw. I wouldn't see what you saw."

"That's all right for you," I said, "if that's the kind of life you want to live."

"What difference would it make?" she asked. "I wouldn't know what kind of life it was. It would be real enough. How would it be any different than the life we're living now? How do we know it isn't the kind of life we're living now? How do you judge reality?"

There was, of course, no answer to her question. There was no way in

which one could prove reality. Lawrence Arlen Knight had accepted the pseudo-life, the unreality of the valley, living in delusion, imagining an ideal life with as much force and clarity as if it had been real. But that was easy for Knight; easy, perhaps, for all the other residents of the valley, for they did not know what was going on. I found myself wondering what sort of fantasy had been invoked within his mind to explain our precipitate departure from his living place. Something, naturally, that would not upset him, that would not interrupt, for a single instant, the dream in which he lived.

"It's all right for you," I said, limply, beaten. "I couldn't go back."

We sat silently by the fire, all talked out, nothing more to say. There was no use in arguing with her. She didn't really mean it. In the morning she would have forgotten it and good sense would prevail. We'd be on our way again. But on our way to where?

"Mike," she finally said.

"Yes, what is it?"

"It could have been good between us if we had stayed on Earth. We are two of a kind. We could have gotten on."

I glanced up sharply. Her face was lighted by the flicker of the fire and there was a strange softness in it.

"Forget it," I said angrily. "I make it a rule never to make a pass at my employer."

I expected her to be furious, but she wasn't. She didn't even wince.

"You know that's not what I meant," she said. "You know what I mean. This trip spoiled it for us. We found out too much about one another. Too many things to hate. I am sorry, Mike."

"So am I," I said.

In the morning she was gone.

22

I stormed at Hoot. "You were awake. You saw her go. You could have wakened me."

"For why?" he asked. "What the use of waking? You would not have stopped her."

"I'd beaten some sense into that stubborn skull of hers."

"Stop her you would not," Hoot maintained. "She but follow destiny and no one's destiny another's destiny and no interference please. George, his destiny his own. Tuck, his destiny his own. Sara, her destiny her own. My destiny my own."

"The hell with destiny!" I yelled. "Look at what it got them. George and Tuck both disappeared and now I got to go and yank Sara out of . . ."

"No yank," honked Hoot, puffing up with anger. "That you must not do. Understanding you miss. It is of yours no business."

"But she sneaked out on us."

"She did not sneak," said Hoot. "She tell me where she go. She take Paint to ride, but pledge to send him back. She left the rifle and what you call the ammo. She say you have need of it. She say she cannot bear to make farewell of you. She crying when she left."

"She ran out on us," I said.

"So did George run out. So did Tuck."

"Tuck and George don't count," I said.

"My friend," said Hoot. "My friend, I crying for you, too."

"Cut out the goddamn sentiment," I yelled at him. "You'll have me bawling with you."

"And that so bad?"

"Yes, it's bad," I said.

"I have hope to wait," said Hoot.

"Wait for what?" I asked. "Wait for Sara? Not that you can notice. I am going back and . . ."

"Not for Sara. For myself. I have hope to wait, but I can wait no longer."

"Hoot, stop talking riddles. What is going on?"

"I leave you now," said Hoot. "Stay I can no longer. I in my second self for long, must go to third self now."

"Look," I said, "you've been blubbering around about the different numbers of yourself ever since we met."

"Three phases," Hoot declared. "Start with first self, then second self, then third."

"Wait a minute, there," I told him. "You mean like a butterfly. First a caterpillar, then a chrysalis, then a . . ."

"I know not this butterfly."

"But in your lifetime you are three things?"

"Second self a little longer, perhaps," said Hoot, sadly, "if not flip momentarily into third self to see in rightness this Lawrence Knight of yours."

"Hoot," I said, "I'm sorry."

"For sorrow is no need," said Hoot. "Third self is joyousness. To be much desired. Look forward to third self with overwhelming happiness."

"Well, hell," I said, "if that is all it is go ahead into your third self. I won't mind at all."

"Third self is awayness," Hoot told me. "Is not here. Is elsewhere. How to explain I do not know. I am sorrow for you, Mike. I sorrow for myself. I sorrow at our parting. You give me life. I give you life. We have a very closeness. Hard trails we travel side by side. We speak with more than words. I'd share this third life with you, but is not possible."

I took a step forward and stumbled to my knees. I held out my hands toward him and his tentacles reached out and engulfed my hands and gripped them hard and in that moment that hands and tentacles closed together and held, I was one with this friend of mine. For an instant I probed into the blackness and the glory of his being and caught a glimpse—or many glimpses—of what he knew, what he remembered, what he hoped, what he dreamed, what he was, the purpose of him (although I am not sure I really caught a purpose), the unreal, shocking, almost incomprehensible structure of his society and the faint, blurred, rainbowed edges of its mores. It flooded in upon my

mind and overwhelmed it in a roaring storm of information, sense, emotion, outrage, happiness, and wonder.

For an instant only, then it was gone, and the hand grip and Hoot himself. I was kneeling, with my two hands held out and there was nothing there. My brain ached with coldness and I could feel the fine bead of sweat that had started on my forehead and I was as close to nothingness as I had ever been, as I could ever be and still remain a human. I knew that I existed, perhaps with a sharper and a finer sense of existing than had ever been the case before, but I don't believe I remembered where I was, for in that linking contact I had been in too many places to sort out any single place and I did not think–I simply hung there, my mind in neutral, crammed with so much that was new that all mentality was clogged.

How long it lasted, I don't know, probably only for a moment, although it seemed much longer than a moment–and then, with a sharp suddenness, with the sort of jolt one experiences when hitting a hard surface after a long fall, I came back to myself and the high blue world and that stupid-looking robot standing rigidly beside the burned-out campfire.

I staggered to my feet and looked about me and tried to remember what had until that instant been crowded in my brain and it all was gone, all the details of it, covered over by the present and my humanity as a flash flood will cover the pebbles lying in the dry bottom of an ancient creek bed. It all was there, or at least some of it was there, for I could sense it lying there beneath the flash flood of my humanity. And I wondered, vaguely, as I stood there, if this burial of the matters transmitted by my friend might not be for my own protection, if my mind, in a protective reflex action, had covered it and blanked it out in a fight for sanity. And I wondered what it was my inner self might know that I no longer knew–surely there was nothing I could remember now which seemed so dangerous that I could not be allowed to know it.

I stumbled over to the fire and hunkered down beside it. Picking up a stick of firewood, I stirred the ashes and at their heart, buried deeply, I came upon a still glowing lump of fire. Carefully I fed tiny slivers to it and a pale ribbon of smoke curled up and in a moment a tiny flame began to flicker.

I crouched there, in the silence, watching and nourishing the flame, bringing the fire of the night before back to careful life. I could bring

back the fire, I thought, but nothing else. Of the night before nothing now remained except myself and the hulking robot. It had come to this, I thought. Of four humans and an alien, there was but one human left. I wavered close to self-pity, but brought myself sharply back from it. Hell, I'd been in tight jams before. I'd been alone before—in fact, I usually was alone. So this was nothing new. George and Tuck were gone and no tears shed over them. Hoot was gone and there might be tears for him—no, not for him, but rather for myself, for he had changed somehow, in some way I could not understand, into a better form of life, to exist on a higher plane of sentience. The one who mattered, I knew, the only one who really mattered, was Sara and she, as well as Hoot, had gone where she'd wished to go.

With a sense of shock I realized that George and Tuck also had gone where they'd wished to go. Everyone had had a place to go—all except myself.

But what, I asked of myself, of Sara? I could go down into the valley and drag her out, kicking and screaming. Or I could sit around a while and wait for her to come to her senses and come back by herself (which, I told myself, would be a waste of time, for she never would). Or I could simply say the hell with it and go stumping down the trail, heading for the city.

I could take the latter course, I argued with myself, with no particular sense of guilt. Certainly any responsibility had been amply discharged. I had fulfilled my part of the bargain. And it had, come to think of it, come out a whole lot better than I had ever thought it would. It had been no wild-goose chase after all; there really had been a Lawrence Arlen Knight and there was a place that he had been seeking. All the others had been right and I had been wrong and maybe that was why I was sitting out here all by myself, with no place in particular that I was hunting for.

There was a metallic clanging and when I looked up I saw that Roscoe had moved over and was squatting down beside me—as if, since there was no one else, he was willing to be a pal to me.

When he had gotten squatted comfortably, he reached out a hand and with his flattened palm smoothed out a dusty spot beside the fire, half dust, half ash. There was a sprig of some sort of grass still remaining, wilted by the heat of last night's fire, and he reached out carefully with thumb and forefinger and uprooted it, then smoothed the area once again.

I watched in fascination. I wondered what he might be about, but there was no use to ask. He'd just spout some gibberish at me.

He stuck out a forefinger neatly and made a squiggly line in the dust and followed that with other marks that, if not entirely squiggly, certainly made no sense. As I watched, it seemed that he was writing a mathematical or chemical formula of some sort—not that I could make any reason of it, but some of the symbols he was writing I had seen before in leafing through a scientific journal in an idle moment.

I could hold in no longer and I yelled at him, "What the hell is that?"

"That," he said, "cat, rat, vat, pat, mat, sat," and then suddenly he was talking, not in rhyme, but still, so far as I was concerned, in gibberish: "Valence bond wave function equals product of antisymmetric spatial wave functions times symmetric wave functions times spin function of both antisymmetric and symmetric wave functions . . ."

"Wait just a goddamn minute," I yelped at him. "What is going on? You talk like Mother Goose one minute and now you're talking like a prof . . ."

"Prof," he said, happily and solemnly, "scoff, doff, cough . . ."

But he went on writing that lingo in the dust. Writing steadily, with never any hesitation, as if he knew what he was doing and exactly what it meant. He filled the place he'd smoothed with symbols, then wiped it clean and smoothed it out again, and continued with his writing.

I held my breath and wished that I could read what he was writing, for despite all his clownishness, I was convinced that it was important.

Suddenly he froze, with his finger in the dust, no longer writing.

"Paint," he said, and I waited for the string of rhyming words, but they did not come. "Paint," he said again.

I leaped to my feet and Roscoe rose to stand beside me. Paint was coming down the trail, loping gracefully. He was alone; Sara was not with him.

He came to a sliding halt before us.

"Boss," he said, "back I come, reporting for the orders. She say for me to hurry. She say to you good-bye, she say to tell God bless you, which is beyond my feeble intellect to comprehend. She say she hope you get safely back to Earth. This humble being, sir, ask you what is Earth."

"Earth is the home planet of our race," I told him.

"Please, illustrous sir, you take me back to Earth?"

I shook my head. "Why should you want to go to Earth?"

"You, sir," he said, "are being of compassion. You did not run away. You come into place of terror and fail to run away. From ridiculous predicament you rescue me with dainty gallantry. I would not willingly wish to wander from your side."

"Thank you, Paint," I said.

"Then, gratefully, I march with you, all the way to Earth."

"No, you don't," I said.

"But you said, fair sir . . ."

"I have something else for you to do."

"Gladly will I perform in small recompense for your rescue of me, but, dear human, I had wished so hard for Earth."

"You'll go back," I said, "and wait for Sara."

"But she say good-bye distinctly. She say it as she meant it."

"You'll wait for her," I said. "I don't want her coming out and no way to get back."

"You think she will come out?"

"I don't know," I said.

"But wait for her I do?"

"That's exactly it," I said.

"But I wait," he wailed. "You go off to Earth and waiting still I am. I maybe wait forever. If you want her, most kindly being, why don't you come back and say to her . . ."

"I can't do that," I said. "Damn fool though she may be, she has to have her chance. Like George. Like Tuck."

And was surprised when I heard what I was saying.

Decision, I had told myself. There was a decision to be made. And here, finally, I had made it—without thought, with no pondering, a decision made without any reason, on no more than instinct. As if I, myself, may not have made it, as if someone else, standing off somewhere in the wings of time, had made it for me. As if Hoot had made it for me. And as I thought of this, I remembered him telling me that I could not interfere, almost pleading with me not to go back into the valley and drag her out of there, as I had said I'd do. Stricken, I wondered how much of himself Hoot had left in me when he'd gone into his third self. And I tried again to snare some remembrance of what it had been like, hand in tentacle, but all of it still was buried, out of reach, somewhere inside my mind, and I couldn't reach it.

"Then I return," said Paint, "full of sadness, but obedient. Earth it may not be, but better than the gully."

He turned to go, but I called him back. I took the rifle and the cartridge belt and tied them to the saddle.

"The weapon she left for you," Paint told me. "No need of it has she."

"If she comes out, she will," I said.

"She not coming out," Paint declared. "You know not coming out. Stars in her eyes she had when she go between the rocks."

I didn't answer. I stood and watched him as he turned and went back down the trail, going slowly so he'd not be out of hearing if I should call him back.

I didn't call him back.

23

That evening, beside the campfire, I opened the box that I had grabbed off the table in Knight's shack.

We had traveled well that day, although with every step I took I fought against the terrible feeling that something called me back, that, as a matter of fact, there were an actual force which sought to turn me back. Slogging along, I tried to figure who it was (not what it was, but who it was) who tried to hold me back. Sara, perhaps—the feeling that I should do something for her, if it were no more than going back to wait in hope she would return. A sense of guilt at deserting her, although I knew well and good I'd not deserted her, no more than we had deserted either George or Tuck. A belief that I had somehow failed her, and in certain instances I undoubtedly had failed her, but not in this particular instance. I think that more than anything else the thing that bothered me was that she apparently had not believed me about what Hoot and I had seen back in the valley. The idea persisted that somehow I should

have made her understand, should have so convinced her she'd have had no thought of returning there. The going back I could understand–if someone had stood just for a moment inside the gates of Heaven he would not suffer gladly being yanked from out the gates. The thing I could not understand was how she could have, willfully and deliberately, have failed to understand, clinging to a beloved illusion in the face of fact.

Or could Hoot have been the one, I wondered, who was tugging at me? Was there something lying hidden in my mind, something that he had planted there in those last few seconds, that kept up a faceless nagging at me? I tried once again to dredge up the bit of information–any bit of information–bearing upon that final encounter, but once again I failed.

Or could it be Paint? I had played a dirty trick on Paint, setting him a task I was unable or unwilling to perform myself. Perhaps, I told myself, I should turn around and go back and tell him he was relieved of the charge I had placed upon him. I tried to fend it off, but could not erase from mind the vision of Paint, a thousand years from now (a million years from now if he still existed a million years from now) still mounting solemn guard outside the portals, waiting for an event that was not about to happen, still faithful to words long gone into the wind as the mouth that spoke them had long gone into dust.

Miserable with all these thoughts, I stumbled down the trail.

To a watcher, we must have seemed a strange pair, I with my ridiculous shield and sword, Roscoe with the pack slung upon his back, clumping along behind me, mumbling to himself.

We had made a good day's journey when we stopped for the night. Going through the pack to get out food, I found the box I'd stolen from Knight. I put it to one side to look at after I had eaten. Roscoe gathered wood and I built a fire and cooked myself a meal while that great stupid hulk hunkered down across the blaze from me and chattered conversationally–and this time not rhyming words nor equation gibberish.

"One eye thou hast," he told me, glibly, "to look to Heaven for grace. The sun with one eye vieweth all the world."

I stared at him, amazed, wondering hopefully if he'd snapped out of it and could finally talk some sense–either that, or gone completely off his rocker.

"Roscoe," I said, as quietly as I could, not wishing to startle him out of any new-found sense, "I wasn't listening. I was thinking of something else. I wonder . . ."

"They can be meek," he told me, "that have no other cause. A wretched soul, bruised with adversity, we bid be quiet when we hear it cry; but were we burdened with like weight of pain, as much, or more, we should ourselves complain."

"Poetry!" I yelled. "Poetry, for the love of God! As if equations and senseless rhyming weren't enough . . ."

He clambered to his feet and danced a merry, clanking jig and sang: "The capon burns, the pig falls from the spit. The clock hath strucken twelve upon the bell; my mistress made it one upon my cheek. She is so hot because the meat is cold; the meat is cold because you came not home; you came not home because you have no stomach; you have no stomach, having broke your fast . . ."

He stopped in mid-caper and stared wonderingly at me. "Fast," he said. "Last, mast, cast."

At least he was back to normal.

He hunkered down by the fire again, no longer talking to me, but mumbling to himself.

The twilight deepened and the galaxy blossomed in the sky, first the brilliance of the central core, hanging just above the eastern horizon, and then, as night came on, the wispy filaments of the spiral arms became apparent, first as a structure of silvery mist, which brightened as the darkness grew. Wind whispered overhead and the campfire smoke, after rising vertically for a short distance, leaned over and slanted off into the darkness as it met the wind. Far off something was chuckling softly to itself and tiny forms of life scurried in the grass and brush just beyond the circle of firelight.

Shakespeare? I wondered. Had it been Shakespeare he had spouted? The words had sounded like it, but I could not be sure; it had been many years since I'd even thought of Shakespeare. And if it were, how had Roscoe known of Shakespeare? In the long flight out from the galaxy, on the long march up the trail, had Knight read it aloud beside the nightly campfire? Had he carried in his knapsack or in a sagging pocket of his jacket a copy of that ancient, almost forgotten writer?

I finished my meal and washed the dishes in the stream beside which we were camped, and set them aside for morning. Roscoe still squatted

at the fire, writing with an outstretched finger on a piece of ground he'd smoothed.

I picked up Knight's wooden box and opened it. Inside lay a thick sheaf of paper, almost filling it. Lifting out the first page, I held it so it was lighted by the fire and read:

> Blue and high. Clean. Upstanding blue. Water sound. Stars ahead. Ground unbare. Laughter high above and blue. Blue laughter. We move unwise. Think unhard . . .

The writing was in a crabbed hand and the characters were cramped and small. Slowly I picked the words apart:

> . . . and thin. No end to start, no end to come. Foreverness and more. Blue foreverness. Runners after nothingness. Nothingness is emptiness. Emptiness is bare. Talk is nothingness. Deeds are emptiness. Where to find but empty? Nowhere, comes the answer. High and blue and empty.

It was gibberish, worse than the gibberish of Roscoe. I glanced down the page and the gibberish went on. Lifting a handful of pages from the box, I extracted another one. Page 52, it said in the upper right hand corner. And the text:

> . . . far is distant. Distances are deep. Neither short nor long, but deep. Some without a bottom. And cannot be measured. No stick to measure with. Purple distances are deepest ones of all. No one walks a purple distance. Purple leads to nowhere. There is nowhere to lead to . . .

I put the pages back into the box and closed the lid and held my hand hard against the lid to prevent the pages getting out. Mad, I thought; living out a life of gentle madness in a Grecian valley of a strange enchantment. And that was where Sara was at this very moment. Not knowing. Not caring, even if she knew.

I fought to keep from jumping up and screaming. I held as hard a hand against myself as I held against the lid to keep from leaping to my feet and go running back the way we'd come.

Because, I told myself, I had no right to do it. For once in my life, I had to think of someone other than myself. She had chosen to go back to the valley. There was something that drew her there. Happiness, I wondered, and asked myself what was happiness and how much did it count?

Knight was happy, writing his drivel, not knowing it was drivel, not caring it was drivel. Wrapped in a cocoon of happiness, in the sense of having reached a devoutly sought and lifelong goal, he was content, not knowing and not caring that the goal might be delusion.

If only Hoot were here, I thought. Although I knew what he would have told me. You cannot interfere, he'd say, you must not interfere. He'd talked of destiny. And what was destiny? Was it something not written in the stars, but in the genes of men that said how they would act, what they would want, how they would set about to get what they wanted most?

The loneliness came on me and I crouched close against the fire, as if its light and heat might be protection against the loneliness. Of all the ones I'd traveled with, there was only Roscoe left and in Roscoe there was nothing that would counter loneliness. In his own way, he was as lonely as was I.

All the others had reached that half-seen, half-guessed vision they had followed. Perhaps because they had known, deep inside themselves, what they might be seeking. And me, what was I seeking? I tried to figure what thing I wanted most and, for the life of me, I could think of nothing.

24

In the morning we found Tuck's doll, where it had been dropped beside the trail. It was in plain view, not more than six feet off the path. How we'd missed it before was hard to understand. I tried to pinpoint the place, wondering if this were in the area where we had hunted for him. But there was no landmark that stood out in my mind.

I had not really had a chance to take a good look at it before. The only time I had really seen it had been that night when we had been penned inside the red-stone edifice at the outskirts of the city. Now I did have a chance to look at it, to absorb the full impact of the sorrow that lay on the rudely carven face. Either, I thought, the one who'd carved it had been a primitive who, by sheer chance, had fashioned the sorrow in it, or a skilled craftsman who, with a few simple strokes, evoked the hopelessness and anguish of an intellectual being facing the riddle of the universe and overwhelmed by it.

The face was not entirely humanoid, but human enough so that one could equate it with humanity—a human face twisted out of shape by some great truth that it had learned—surely no truth that it had sought, but rather one that had been thrust upon it.

Having picked it up, I tried to throw it away, but could not throw it away. It had put roots into me and would not let me go. It haunted me and would not forego its haunting. I stood with one hand clutching it and tried to toss it to one side, but my fingers would not loosen their grip nor my arm make a throwing motion.

That had been the way it had been with Tuck, I thought, except that Tuck had been a willing captive of it, finding in it some attraction and significance that I did not find. Perhaps because it said to him a thing he found inside himself. Because, perhaps, he saw within it a condition

from which he was seeking to escape. A madonna, Sara had said, and it could have been, but I saw no madonna in it.

So I went marching down the trail, like Tuck, hanging onto that damn thing, raging at myself—not so much for being unable to let go of it, as for the fact that it made me, after a fashion, a blood brother of the vanished Tuck. Sore that I should be even in the slightest way like him, for if there ever had been a man I had despised it had been Tuck.

We moved across the great blue plateau and behind us the purple mountains lost detail and resolved into a purple cloud. I wondered if Knight's fascination with blueness, as revealed in those first few paragraphs of his manuscript, might not be an echo of this blue land which he had crossed to reach the mountains and the valley, leaving Roscoe at the gate, with Roscoe later blundering down the trail to finally reach the city where, in his stupidity, he'd become a captive of the gnome.

After several days, from boredom rather than from curiosity, I opened the box again and took out the manuscript. Starting at the very beginning of it, I read it carefully—not all at once, of course, for it was slow going and tightly written and hard to decipher and there were many pages of it. I studied it as a scholar in some time-droning monastery might have studied some arcane roll of parchment, seeking, I think, not so much information as an understanding of the kind of mind that would write such a mass of garbage, trying to look through the vapid wanderings of that mind to a kernel of truth that still might dwell subconsciously in the man.

But there was nothing there, or at least nothing I could find. It was totally unintelligible and most of it inconceivable to anyone but an utter moron overflowing with words that must be gotten out of him, no matter what they meant.

It was not until the tenth night or so, when we were only two days march from the beginning of the desert, that I finally reached a portion of the manuscript that seemed to make some sense:

> . . . And these ones seek blue and purple knowledge. From all the universe they seek it. They trap all that may be thought or known. Not only blue and purple, but all spectra of knowing. They trap it on lonely planets, far lost in space and deep in time. In the blue of time. With trees they trap it and trapped, it is stored and kept against a time of golden harvest. Great orchards

of mighty trees that tower into the blue for miles. Soaking in the thought and knowledge. As other planets soak in the gold of sun. And this knowledge is their fruit. Fruit is many things. It is sustenance for body and for brain. It is round and long and hard and soft. It is blue and gold and purple. Sometimes red. It ripens and it falls. It is harvested. For harvesting is a gathering and fruiting is a growing. Both are blue and gold . . .

And he was off again into his nonsensical ramblings in which color and shape and size, as it had all through the manuscript, played a major role.

I went back and read the single paragraph again and went back carefully over the preceding pages to find some indication of who "these ones" might be, but there was nothing that could help me.

I put the manuscript away and sat late beside the fire, thinking furiously. Was that one paragraph no more than the disordered meandering of a half-mad mind, as must be all the rest of it? Or did it, perchance, represent a single lucid moment during which he'd written down some fact, couched in his disjointed, mystic style, that he knew might be important? Or could it be that Knight was less crazy than I thought and that all the gibberish of the manuscript was no more than a camouflage in which might be concealed a message that he wanted to transmit to whoever might somehow get his hands upon it? That this might be the case seemed farfetched. If he had been clear enough in mind to do a thing like that he would have long since quit the valley and come pelting down the trail, hoping against hope that he might find some way to flee the planet and carry what he knew back to the galaxy.

If the words should be a hidden message, how had he found out? Was there a record somewhere in the city that would tell the story? Or had he talked to someone or something that had seized the chance to pass on the knowledge of why this planet should be a planted orchard? Or had it, perhaps, been Roscoe who had learned the truth? There might be ways, I thought, that Roscoe could find out, for Roscoe was, of all things, a telepathic robot. Although right now he didn't look like one. He squatted beside me and once again he had smoothed out a slate upon the ground and was writing symbols, softly jabbering to himself.

I almost asked him and then decided not to try. There was nothing, I was convinced, that anyone could learn from this battered robot.

The next morning we went on and on the second day we came to the cache we'd made, filled one of the water tins and retrieved some food. With the water and the supplies on Roscoe's back, we faced the desert.

We made good time. We passed the field where I had fought the centaurs and came to, and went on without stopping, the gully where we'd found Old Paint. We stumbled on old campfires where we'd spent a night, we recognized certain landmarks and the land was red and yellow and honkers hooted in the distances and we glimpsed at times some of the other strange denizens of the place. But nothing interfered with us and we drove on down the trail.

Now the others came out to travel with us, a shadowy, ghostly company—Sara riding on Old Paint, Tuck tripping in his long brown robe and leading the stumbling, fumbling George Smith by the hand, Hoot ranging far ahead, always ranging far ahead to spy out the trail, and I found myself shouting to him, a foolish thing to do, for he was too far ahead of us to hear me. There were times, I think, when I believed they were really with us, and other times when I knew they weren't. But even when I knew they weren't, it was a comfort to imagine that I saw them. There was one thing that perplexed me. Tuck carried the doll clutched tight against his breast and at the same time I carried the selfsame doll in the pocket of my jacket.

The doll no longer was glued to my hand. I could let loose of it, but I kept on carrying it. I don't know why I did. Somehow I just had to. At nights I'd sit and look at it, half-repelled, half-fascinated, but night by night, it seemed, the repulsion wore away and the fascination won. I either sat looking at the doll, hoping that some day I might encompass within my mind all I saw upon its face and then be done with it. Either that or read the manuscript, which continued on its witless way until near the very end when this occurred:

> . . . Trees are tallnesses. Trees reach high. Never satisfied. Never fulfilled. What I write about trees and trapped knowledge being true. Tops are vapory, blue vapor . . .
>
> *What I say about trees and trapped knowledge being true . . .*

Was that single sentence tucked in among the gibberish put there to

fortify and reaffirm what he had written many pages back? Another flash of lucidity in the midst of all his foolishness? One was tempted to believe so, but there was no way to know.

The next night I finished reading the manuscript. There was nothing more.

And the third day after that we sighted the city, far off, like a snowy mountain thrusting up into the sky.

25

The tree still lay where I had chopped it down with the raking laser beam, its jagged stump like a massive spear stabbing at the sky. The bole stretched for miles along the ground, its vegetation shriveled brown, revealing its woody skeleton.

Beyond it loomed the bulk of the red-stone edifice in which the tree had penned us with its bombardment, and looking at it, I could hear again, in memory and imagination, the sound of millions of invisible wings flying underneath its roof, beating their way out of nowhere into nowhere.

A foul and bitter stench blew from the tree and as we approached it I could see that the circular, lawnlike area which had surrounded the stump had caved in upon itself and become a pit. Out of the pit rose the stench and from the knoll on which we stood I caught a glimpse of slimy skeletons–strangely wrought but undeniably skeletons–floating in the oily liquid that half filled the pit.

Not just one life, I told myself, not the life of the tree alone, but an entire community of life–the little, crying, mewling creatures that had swarmed out to cry their denunciations of us and now this, another community of life which had existed in a fluid reservoir underneath the tree. Life that in some way was intimately bound up with the tree, that

could no longer live once the tree was dead, that may have lived only so that the tree might live. I looked for some evidence of the mewling creatures which, by now, must be dead as well. There was no sign of them. Had they in death, I wondered, dried up into almost weightless nothingness, and been scattered by the wind.

I had been the one, I thought. It had been my hand that had loosed the death. I had intended to kill the tree alone; I had killed much else besides. I wondered what had come over me that I should be thinking this. They'd had it coming, hadn't they? The tree had attacked us and I had had every moral reason and every legal right to fight back. That much at least was gospel, a personal and very intimate gospel built up through the years. Nothing acted tough toward me that I didn't act tough right back. And it worked, I told myself grimly. Throughout our long trek to the mountains and the long trek back, no tree had made a pass at us. The word somehow had been passed along: Leave this guy alone; he's pure poison if you mess around with him. Not knowing I no longer had a laser gun, apparently not wanting to take the chance of finding out.

I felt Roscoe pawing at my shoulder and turned to see what it was he wanted. He pointed back the way we'd come.

And there they were, a herd of them. There was no mistaking them. They were, in flesh, the kind of monstrous beasts that had left their skeletons piled in a windrow back in the gorge where we had rescued Paint. They were massive things, running on great hind legs, with tails thrust out behind them to balance the great bulk of their bodies and their gigantic heads, with poised front legs armed with sharp and gleaming talons. The heads grinned at us and even from that distance there was evil in the faces. They might have been following us for a long time, but this was the first time they had shown themselves.

They were big and ugly and they were coming fast. I had seen what they could do and I wasn't about to wait and let them get to work on me. I lit out of there, heading for the trail that led toward the city. The shield weighed me down and I threw it away. The scabbarded sword banged against my knees and I tried to get the belt unbuckled, and while I was doing this the sword tripped me and I went sprawling like a cartwheel. Just before I came out of my spin and was falling flat upon my face, a hand reached out and grabbed me by the sword belt and held me high enough so that I cleared the ground, just barely. I hung there, swaying back and forth and watched the ground jerk by

underneath my nose and out of one corner of my eyes I saw Roscoe's feet moving like a blur.

My God, how he could run.

I tried to angle my head around to see where we might be, but I was so near the ground I couldn't see a thing. It wasn't comfortable and it was embarrassing, but I wasn't beefing any. Roscoe was covering the ground in a satisfactory manner, much faster than if he'd had to wait for me.

Then finally I saw pavement underneath my face and Roscoe jerked me up and set me on my feet. I was a little dizzy and inclined to stagger, but I saw we were in the narrow city street we'd traveled days before, with the straight white walls arrowing up into the sky above us.

Angry snarling and vicious trumpeting sounded behind me and when I spun around I saw the pursuing beasts throwing their bodies into the narrow cleft of street, throwing them ferociously and vainly, fighting to get at us, fighting to get in. But we were safe. Finally I had an answer as to why the streets should be so narrow.

26

The ghostly ships still stood upon the whiteness of the landing field with the great white cliffs of the city rising up like the inner sides of a gigantic cup. The field was as clean as ever and there was a deathly silence over everything. Nothing stirred; there was no breath of wind.

The shriveled, shrunken body of the gnome hung limp and listless at the end of a rope tied to a rafter in the storeroom. The storeroom looked as it had before, with boxes, bales and bundles piled high. There was no sign of the hobbies.

In that great room to which the ramp led up from the street the slabs

of stone were still in place, with the circular control dial to one side of them. One of the slabs was glowing and in the glow was a nightmare world of what seemed a brand-new planet, its half-molten, half-crystallized surface heaving in a slow pulsation, pitted with craters of red-hot slag, steam vents sending out slender plumes of smoke and superheated water. In the distance volcanoes belched flame and heavy clouds of smoke.

Roscoe had unloaded his packs and the water tin just inside the door that opened on the ramp and now was hunkered down, scratching at the floor, but making no marks upon it, and for once he wasn't mumbling to himself.

I went on breaking up the wooden bench I'd taken from the storeroom, feeding the fire I'd built upon the floor. And here I was, I thought, a latter-day barbarian camping in the deserted city of a vanished race, with another barbarian swinging at the end of a rope in the room next door and a mechanical intelligence working on a problem that no one knew, perhaps least of all himself.

It was incredible that Roscoe could know what he was doing. There would have been no need to program him for the kind of calculations that he seemed to be engaged in working out. Was it possible, I wondered, that the beating his brain case had taken while being used as a polo ball had not only knocked out of him all ordinary sense, but had knocked genius into him?

The sun had passed its zenith and the lower part of the street outside lay in darkness, but by craning my neck, I could see the sunlight on the upper storeys of the soaring buildings. And from that upper part of the city came the faint, far-off sound of wind funneling through the higher levels. Down in the lower levels there was no hint of breeze.

A deserted city and why had it been deserted? What had happened to drive its people from it, or had they been driven? Perhaps they had accomplished their purpose and the city had served its purpose and they had simply left, for there may have been other planets where they could carry out other purposes, or maybe the same purpose as they had followed here. And could that purpose have been solely the planting of the trees—the planting of them and their careful nurturing until they had reached a size where they no longer needed care? It would have taken centuries, perhaps millennia, before the trees could be left on their own. The surveying to determine where they should be planted

and the planting of them, the preliminary task alone would have required many years. And after that the building of the pits to store the seeds and the raising of the little rodents that collected them—there would be much to do.

But it would have been worth the work and time if the trees, indeed, were planted for the purpose hinted in Knight's manuscript. Each tree a receiving station that picked up information by a means that I could not imagine (the interception of mental waves, perhaps?) that filtered out from the galaxy. Millions of receivers hanging above the expanse of the galaxy, picking up the knowledge radiations, processing and enhancing them and storing them against a time when the planters could come at periodic intervals and extract the knowledge which had been thus collected. And where would the knowledge thus derived be stored? Certainly not in the trees themselves, but in the seeds, perhaps, storing it in a complicated DNA-RNA complex, altering the purely biological characteristics of the nucleic acids so that instead of biological information alone many other kinds of information also might be stored.

I sweated, thinking of it. In the pits and bins in which the rodents dropped the seeds rested a treasure greater than anyone could dream. Anyone who could gather the seeds and crack the technique and the code to give up the knowledge they contained would have the intellectual resources of the galaxy at their fingertips. If one could beat the planters of this planetary orchard to the harvest, there would be rich pickings to be had. The planters, well aware of such a danger, had taken extraordinary precautions against word of the planet and its purpose ever leaking out. Outsiders could come here, were even encouraged to come here once they were in range, but once here there was, it seemed, no way to leave and carry back to the galaxy news of what they'd found.

How often did the planters come, I wondered. Every thousand years, perhaps. In each thousand years, most certainly, there'd be new galactic knowledge worthy of acquiring. Or did they come no longer? Had something happened to them that had stopped their harvest trips? Or could they have abandoned the entire project as no longer worth the effort? In the millennia which may have passed since this city had been built and this planet planted, had there been a shift in values and in viewpoint so that now to them, now either a more mature or a senile

race, this planting of the planet (or, perhaps, of many planets) might seem no more than a childish program performed in the mistaken enthusiasm of their youth.

My legs were getting cramped from crouching and I put out a hand to rest, palm down, on the floor, preparatory to changing my position and as I reached out, my hand came down upon the doll. I didn't pick it up; I didn't want to look at it. I simply ran my fingers over the carven planes of that saddened face and I thought, as I did this, that the planters of the planet, the builders of the city, had not been the first. Before they had arrived there had been another race, the one that had built the churchlike edifice at the city's edge. One of them had carved the doll and it might be, I told myself, that the carving of the doll had been a greater feat, a more intellectual, certainly a more emotional, accomplishment than the building of the city and the planting of the trees.

But now neither race was here. I, a member of another race, perhaps not so great but as weasel-motivated as any race in the galaxy, was here. I was here and I knew the story and the treasure and the treasure was a very solid thing, much more valuable than that haunted myth which Knight had hunted. It was something that could be sold and in that context I could understand it better than I could understand a myth. Knight may have known—he must have known to write of it as he had—but by the time he knew he probably had become so committed, so immersed in the phantom that he hunted that he would have passed it by as worthless.

Poor fool, I thought, to pass up a chance like this. Although, I realized, he may have psssed it up only after he had realized there was no way off the planet.

I was not convinced, I told myself. There had to be a way. There always was a way if you worked hard enough at it. No gang of stupid orchardists could keep me here.

First something to eat and a little rest and I'd get at those other worlds. Despite what Sara had said about the chance that all of them would be isolated worlds, it did not stand to reason that there'd not be one of them that had some space-capable intelligence. And that was all I asked. Just to get my hands, by any means, upon a ship, any kind of a ship.

I wondered what I should do with the gnome and decided that I'd

leave him hanging there, dangling from his beam. Even if I took him down I'd not know what to do with him; I could not know what he might have wished for me to do with him. Hanging from the beam had been the way he'd wanted it and that's the way he had it and I'd not interfere. Although I wondered why he did it. And recognized the fact that the way he'd done it emphasized that he was humanoid. Nothing other than a humanoid ever hanged itself.

I glanced over at Roscoe. He had quit his ciphering and now was sitting flat upon his bottom, with his feet stuck out before him, staring into space. As if he had suddenly struck upon some astounding truth and had frozen into immobility to consider it.

27

Sara had been right. There was nowhere to go. The worlds offered no way out. I had been through them all, driving myself, sleeping only in snatches when I became so worn-out that I was afraid I'd become negligent and sloppy in my evaluation of them. I did not hurry the work. I spent more time, most likely, than was absolutely necessary, in having a good look at each of them in turn.

It had taken a while to figure out how to operate the wheel to bring each world into being, but once I had done that I settled down to work, paying attention to nothing else. Roscoe did not bother me and I, in turn, paid slight attention to him except to note that much of the time he was not around. I got the impression, somehow, that he was prowling through the city, but did not take the time to wonder what might be the purpose of his prowling.

One could not say, of course, that no one of the worlds held the kind of technology I sought. Only a small portion of each stood revealed and it would have been foolhardy for me to have entered one of them

unless there had been ample evidence that it was the kind of place I hunted. For once one entered one of them, the chances of escaping from it would have been almost nil. Without Hoot and the creature of the wheel we never would have escaped from the sand dune world. But the fact was that I found no world that tempted me in the least to enter it, not a single one that showed any sign of even the most rudimentary intelligence. All of them were vicious worlds, mostly primal worlds–jungle hells or frozen wastes or still in the state of crust formation. There were others that had thick atmospheres, with swirling clouds of gases that made me choke just to look at them. There were a few that were clearly dead worlds–great level plains without vegetation, dimly lighted by a dim and blood-red, dying sun. There was one charred cinder of a planet, burned out in a nova flareup of its sun.

Why, I wondered, had the doorways to the worlds been fashioned? Certainly if anyone had wanted to use the doorways to these other planets, he would have planned for them to open on the outskirts of a city, or at least a village. He would not have settled for a jungle or an icy waste or a burned-out cinder. Could they have been there for no other reason than to get rid of unwelcome visitors? But if that had been the case, one world or at most a half a dozen would have been sufficient; there would have been no need of hundreds. There was no reason for that many worlds or those kinds of worlds. Although I realized that there must, in the minds of that other race, have been logical reasons for it all, and these logical reasons could not possibly occur to me because they did not lie within the parameters of human logic.

So I came to an end of them and was no better off than I had been before; worse off, perhaps, for when I had started on it there had been hope and now the hope was gone.

I went back to the fire, but the fire was out. I pressed my palm down on the ashes and there was no warmth. Roscoe was gone; I could not remember seeing him for days.

Had he deserted me, perhaps not actually deserting me, but simply wandering off and not bothering to come back? This might be, I admitted to myself, the end of it. There might be no more that a man could do.

I sat down beside the dead ashes of the fire and stared out into the twilight of the street.

There still might be other possibilities–somewhere in the city a man

might find a way or clue; out on the planet, traveling east or west or south rather than toward the mountains looming to the north, there might be an answer waiting. But I didn't have the will for it. I didn't want to move. I didn't want to try again. I was ready to give up.

More over, gnome, I said.

But that was wrong, I knew. It was defeatist talk. It was dramatizing. When the time came to try again, when and if I caught the glimmer of a hope, I'd get up and go.

But now I simply sat and felt sorry for myself–and not only for myself, but for all the rest of us. Although why I should feel sorry for Smith or Tuck or Sara, I didn't really know. They'd gotten what they wanted.

Down in the twilight of the street a shadow moved, a darkness in the gray, and a twinge of terror went fluttering through me, but I didn't stir. If whatever might be down there wanted to come up and get me it would find me here, beside the campfire ashes. I still had the sword and I was awkward with it, but I'd still put up a fight.

My nerves must have been worn down to frayed ends for me to be thinking this. There was no reason to believe there was anything in the city that was out to get me. The city was deserted and abandoned; nothing moved in it but shadows.

But the shadow, as I watched, kept on moving. It left the street and came up the ramp toward me, moving jerkily, like an old man stumping down a narrow lane that offered uneven footing.

I saw that it was Roscoe and, poor thing that he was, I was glad to have him back. As he came nearer I rose to greet him.

He stopped just before he reached the door and, speaking carefully, as if he might be fighting against falling into his rhyming routine, he said, slowly and deliberate, with a pause between each word, "You will come with me."

"Roscoe," I said, "thanks for coming back. What is going on?"

He stood in the twilight, staring stupidly at me, then he said, still slowly, carefully, with each word forced out of him: "If the mathematics work . . ." then came to a halt. Mathematics had given him quite a bit of trouble.

"I had troubles," he said. "I was confused. But I have worked it out and I am better now. Working it out helped to get me better." He was talking with somewhat less difficulty, but it still wasn't easy for him.

The long speech had been an effort for him. You could feel him forcing himself to speak correctly.

"Take it easy, Roscoe," I counseled. "Don't try too hard. You are doing fine. Just take it easy now."

But he wasn't about to take it easy. He was full of what he had to say. It had been bottled up inside of him for a long time and it was bubbling to get out.

"Captain Ross," he said, "I was fearful for a time. Fearful I would never work it out. For there are two things on this planet and they both struggled for expression and I could not get them sorted, sported, forted, courted . . ."

I moved forward quickly and grabbed him by the arm. "For the love of God," I pleaded, "take it easy. You have all the time there is. There isn't any hurry. I'll wait to hear you out. Don't try to talk too fast."

"Thank you, captain," he said with an effort at great dignity, "for your forebearance and your great consideration."

"We've traveled a long road," I told him. "We can take a little time. If you have any answers, I can wait for them. Myself, I'm fresh out of anything like answers."

"There is the structure," he said. "The white structure of which the city is made and the spaceport floored and the spaceships sealed."

He stopped and waited for so long that I was afraid something might have happened to him. But after a time he spoke again.

"In ordinary matter," he said, "the bonding between the atoms involves only the outer shells. Do you understand?"

"I think I do," I said. "Rather foggily."

"In the white material," he said, "bonding extends deeper than the outer orbits of the electrons, down deep into the shell. You grasp the implication?"

I gasped as I understood at least a little of what he had just told me.

"All hell," I said, "couldn't break the bond."

"Precisely," he declared. "That is what was thought. Now you will come with me, captain, if you please."

"But just a minute," I protested. "You haven't told it all. You said there were two things."

He looked at me for a long moment, as if he might be debating if he should tell me further, then he asked a question, "What do you know, captain, of reality?"

I shrugged. It was a foolish question. "At one time," I told him, doubtfully, "I would have told you I could recognize reality. Now I'm not so sure."

"This planet," he said, "is layered in realities. There are at least two realities. There may be many more."

He was almost fluent now, although there still were times he stuttered and had to force his words out and his delivery of them was spaced imperfectly.

"But how," I asked, "do you know all this? About the bonding and reality?"

"I do not know," he said. "I only know I know it. And now, please, can we go?"

He turned and went down the ramp and I followed him. What had I to lose? I had nothing going for me and maybe he had nothing going for him, either, maybe all he said were just empty words born of an enlarged imagination, but I was at a point where I was ready to make a grab at any straw.

The idea of more tightly bonded atoms made a feeble sort of sense, although as I ran it through my mind I couldn't figure out how it might be done. But this business of a many-layered reality was outright gibberish. It made no sense at all.

We reached the street and Roscoe headed for the spaceport. He was no longer mumbling to himself and he was walking rapidly, as if he might have a purpose—so rapidly that I had to hurry to keep up with him. He was changed—there was no doubt of that—but I had a hard time making up my mind whether it was an actual change or just a new phase of his madness.

When we emerged from the street onto the spaceport, I saw that it was morning. The sun was about halfway up the eastern sky. The spaceport, with its milk-white floor, surrounded by the whiteness of the city, was a place of glare and in that glare the whiteness of the ships stood up like daytime ghosts.

We headed out into the immensity of the port. Roscoe seemed to be moving just a little faster than he had before. Falling behind, I had to trot every now and then to keep up with him. I would have liked to ask him what it was all about, but I had no breath to waste in asking and, in any case, I wasn't sure that he would tell me.

It was a long hike. For a long time it seemed we had scarcely moved

and then, rather suddenly, we were a long way from the city walls and closer to the ships.

We were fairly close to Sara's ship before I saw the contraption at its base. It was a crazy-looking thing, with a mirror of some sort and what I took to be a battery (or at least a power source) and a maze of wires and tubing. It wasn't very big, three feet or so in height and maybe ten feet square and from a distance it looked like an artistic junk heap. Closer up it looked less like a junk heap; it looked like something a couple of vacation-bored kids would rig up from assorted odds and ends they had managed to accumulate, pretending that they were building some sort of wondrous machine.

I stopped and stared at it, unable to say a word. Of all the goddamned foolishness I had ever seen, this was the worst. During all the time I had been sweating out my heart, running through the worlds, this silly robot had been hunting through the city to pick up all kinds of forgotten and discarded junk and had been lugging it out here and setting up this thing.

He had squatted down before what I imagine he imagined to be a control panel and was reaching out his hands to the knobs and switches on it.

"Now, captain," he said, "if the mathematics should be right."

He did something to the panel and here and there tubes flickered briefly and there was a sound like the sound of breaking glass and a shower of glasslike fragments were peeling off the ship and crashing to the ground and the ship stood free of the milk-white glaze the buglike machine had squirted over it.

I stood frozen. I couldn't move. The fool machine had worked and the ship stood free and ready and I couldn't move. It was incomprehensible. I could not believe it. Roscoe couldn't do this. Not the fumbling, mumbling Roscoe I had known. I was only dreaming it.

Roscoe stood up and came over to me. He put out both his hands and gripped me by the shoulders, standing facing me.

"It is done," he said. "Both for it and I. When I freed the ship, I freed myself as well. I am whole and well again. I am my olden self."

And indeed he seemed so, although I'd not known his olden self. He had no difficulty talking and he stood and moved more naturally, more like a man, less like a clanking robot.

"I was confused," he said, "by all that happened to me, by the

changes in my brain, changes that I could not comprehend and did not know how to use. But now, having used them and proved that they are useful, I am quite myself once more."

I found that the paralysis which had gripped me now was gone and I tried to turn so that I could run toward the ship, but he clung tightly to my shoulders and would not let me go.

"Hoot talked to you of destiny," he said. "This is my destiny. This and more. The movers of the universe, whatever they may be, work in many ways to achieve each individual destiny. How other can one explain why the hammering of crude mallets on my brain could have so changed and short-circuited and altered the pattern of my brain as to have brought about an understanding I did not have before . . ."

I shook myself free of him.

"Captain," he said.

"Yes."

"You do not believe it even yet. You still think I am an oaf. And I may have been an oaf. But I am no longer."

"No," I said, "I guess you're not. There is no way to thank you."

"We are friends," he said. "There is no need of thanks. You freed me of the centaurs. I free you of this planet. That should make us friends. We have sat by many campfires. That should make us friends . . ."

"Shut up!" I yelled at him. "Cut out the goddamned sentiment. You are worse than Hoot."

I went around his ridiculous contraption and climbed the ladder of the ship, Roscoe climbing close behind me.

In the pilot chair I reached out and patted the panel.

This was it at last. We could take off any time we wanted. We could leave the planet and carry with us the secret of the planet's treasure. Just how a man could turn a treasure such as that into a cash transaction I had no idea at the moment, but I knew I'd find a way. Whenever a man had a commodity to sell, he'd find a way to sell it.

And was this what it all had come to, I asked myself—that I should have something I could sell? Not another planet (although I suppose I could have sold the planet, too) but the knowledge and the information that was stored upon the planet in the form of seeds, knowledge collected by trees that were thought receivers, storing the knowledge they collected in the seeds they scattered and, that scattered, were collected by colonies of little rodents and not eaten, but deposited in great pits and granaries against the day of harvest.

But there was more to it than that, I told myself. More to the planet than a great white city and knowledge-grabbing trees. It also was a planet where a man might simply disappear (or fade away, as Tuck had faded) and when they faded or they disappeared, where did they go? Did they move into another reality, into another life, as Hoot had moved into another life? There had been another culture, an earlier culture than the one that had built the city. This earlier culture had built the now-empty red-stone building at the outskirts of the city and had carved the doll that sagged out of the pocket of my jacket. Could that culture, if it had survived, have been able to tell the secret of how a man might fade away?

Roscoe had spoken of a many-layered reality and was that what it was all about? And if this were the case, did such a segmented reality exist only on this planet or might it exist as well on other planets?

I had thought of it as gibberish and perhaps it still was gibberish, but Roscoe had been right about the mathematics (or whatever one might call them) which had freed the ship. Might he not be right about the reality as well?

But all of this, I told myself, had nothing to do with me. I had wondered what I'd wanted back there on the trail and it had not been what Sara or Tuck or George, or even Hoot, had wanted. All I'd wanted was to get off the planet and now I had the means of getting off. All of us, at last, had found the thing we wanted. All that remained for me was to seal the hatch and activate the motors.

It was a simple thing and yet I hesitated. I stayed sitting in the pilot's chair staring at the panel. Why, I asked myself, this reluctance to get started?

Could it be the others? There had been four of us to start with; did I shrink from only one returning?

I sat there and tried to be honest with myself and found that it was difficult to be honest with myself.

Tuck and George were out of reach and so was Hoot. There was no sense hunting them to bring them back. But there was Sara still. She could be reached and I could bring her back, somehow I still could manage that.

I sat and tried to fight it all out once again and there was a funny smarting in my eyes and with something close to horror I realized that tears were running down my cheeks.

Sara, I said to myself. Sara, for the love of Christ, why did you have

to go and find what you were looking for? Why can't you come back and go home with me? Why can't I go and get you?

I remembered that last night as we'd sat beside the campfire and she had said it could have been so good between us—so good between us if we'd not gone charging out to chase a legend. And why did the stupid legend have to turn out to be true and spoil it all for us?

And I remembered, too, that first day when she'd met me in the hall of that house back on Earth and we'd walked down the hall together, arm in arm, to the room where Tuck and George had waited.

Not Tuck or George or Hoot, for they were out of reach. Not Sara, because I couldn't bring myself to do it. But there was someone else.

I heaved out of the chair and went to the cabinet at the back of the cabin. From it I took the spare laser gun.

"We're going back," I said to Roscoe.

"Going back," said Roscoe, "for Miss Foster?"

"No," I said. "For Paint."

28

It was insane, of course, Paint was nothing but a hobby. He'd still be in the gully, flat upon his back, if it hadn't been for me. How long did I have to keep flying to his rescue? He'd said he wanted to go to Earth and what did he know of Earth? He had never been there. He had even had to ask me what I meant by Earth. He hadn't wanted to go until I'd told him what it was. And yet I could not shake the memory of him going so slowly down the trail so he'd still be in hearing distance if I should call him back. And I remembered, too, how he'd carried me so bravely in the battle with the centaur. Although, come to think of it, neither he nor I could claim any credit there. The credit all was Sara's.

"I wish," said Roscoe, striding along beside me, "that I could understand, in fullness, the concept of multiple-realities. I am certain I have it all in mind, if I could only see it. It's like a puzzle with a million pieces and all you have to do is put the pieces all together and there it is, so simple that you wonder why you didn't see it all to start with."

It would have been better, I thought, if he went back to mumbling. It would be less disturbing that way. I wouldn't have to listen to his mumbling because I'd know it made no sense. But I had to keep on listening to his chattering because there might be something in whatever he was saying.

"It is a new ability," said Roscoe, "and it is most confusing. Environmental-sensing, I suppose, would be the proper term for it. No matter where you go you sense, and know, the environmental factors."

I didn't pay too much attention to him, for I had a lot of thinking to be done. I wasn't even sure we should be heading out again. The logical thing to have done would have been to close the hatch and take off and be shut of the planet. Although if I had wanted to cash in later we should have picked up a pocketful of the seeds so they could be tested to see if they really carried knowledge. We could have left, I told myself, with clear consciences. All accounts were settled. The purpose of the voyage had been accomplished and everyone had gotten what they wanted.

Half a dozen times I was ready to turn back, but each time kept on going. It was as if someone had a broad hand against my back and was shoving me along.

When we had left the city there had been no sign of the monstrous beasts which had chased us into it. I had half expected they might be waiting for us and I almost wished they had been. With the laser rifle they would have been no sweat. But they weren't there and we went on, past the great red building dreaming in the sunlight, past the mighty tree trunk prone upon the ground for miles and the noisome pit centering on the jagged stump.

The way seemed shorter than it had on the first trip out. We drove ourselves, as if there were some great urgency. And at night around the campfire Roscoe smoothed out a patch of ground and worked on endless equations, mumbling at his work, half to me, half to himself.

Night after night, as he wrote and mumbled, I sat with him in the flare of the campfire light and tried to figure out why we were here and

not many millions of miles in space, heading back toward the galaxy. And it came clearly to me that it was not Paint alone, although Paint was a part of it. It was more than Paint; it was Sara who was dragging me back across the empty miles. I saw her face in the firelight, across the blaze from me, with the lock of hair forever falling in her eyes, with the streak of travel smudge smeared across one cheek, with her eyes looking at me steadily.

At times I pulled the doll from the jacket pocket and sat staring at its face–at that terrible, tortured face–perhaps to cancel out that other face across the fire from me, perhaps in the irrational hope that those wooden lips would part and speak, giving me an answer. For, again irrationally, the doll was a part of it as well, a part of all that was happening as many great imponderables seemed to be closing upon collision courses.

At last, after many days, we climbed a ridge and saw before us the beginning of that last badlands area–where the hobbies had deserted us and we'd found the pile of bones and Paint.

The trail led down the rise and across a flat and climbed, twisting, up into the badlands.

Far up the trail, just this side of the point where it plunged to disappear into the badlands, something was moving, a tiny point of light flashing in the sun. I watched it, puzzled for a moment, and then it moved into a position on the trail where it was outlined against the darker ground behind it. And there was no mistaking it–the rocking, bobbing lope.

Roscoe spoke quietly beside me. "It is Paint," he said.

"But Paint wouldn't come back without . . ."

And then I was running down the slope, waving my arms and shouting, with Roscoe close upon my heels.

From far off she saw us and waved back at us, a little gesturing doll upon the loping Paint.

Paint was coming like the wind. He fairly skimmed the ground. We met out on the flat, Paint skidding to a stop. Before I could reach her, Sara slid off Paint. She was raging at me. It was like old times.

"You did it again!" she yelled at me. "I couldn't stay. You loused it up for me. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't forget what you and Hoot had told me. You knew it would be like that. You had it figured out. You were so sure of it you left Paint to bring me back."

"Sara," I protested, "for the love of God, be reasonable."

"No," she cried, "you listen. You spoiled everything for me. You took away the magic and you . . ."

She stopped talking in midsentence and her face was twisted up as if she were trying not to weep.

"No, that's not it," she said. "It wasn't only you. It was all of us. With our petty bickering and . . ."

I took two quick steps and had her in my arms. She clung to me. Hating me, perhaps, but clinging to me because I was the one last thing that she had to cling to.

"Mike," she said, her voice muffled against my chest, "we aren't going to make it. It simply is no use. They won't let us make it."

"But that's all wrong," I told her. "The ship is clear. Roscoe found the way. We're going back to Earth."

"If generous, hopeful human will only take a look," said Paint, "he'll perceive what she be talking of. They follow all the way. They dog our hurrying footprints. They get more all the time."

I jerked up my head and there they were, crowding together along the rugged skyline of the badlands–a mighty herd of the massive beasts that had left their bones in a windrow in the gully.

They crept forward, pushing and shoving, and some of them were forced down the distant slopes to make way for those who crowded in behind them. There were hundreds of them, more likely thousands of them. They didn't seem to move; they flowed, spilling off the slopes, spreading out on either flank.

"They're behind us, too," said Roscoe, speaking far too quietly, making too much of an effort to stifle rising panic.

I twisted my head around and there, on the crest of the ridge we had just crossed, they were surging into view.

"You found the doll," said Sara.

"What doll?" I asked. At a time like this, of all crazy things . . .

"Tuck's doll," she said. She reached out and tugged it from the pocket. "Do you know, all the time Tuck had it, I never really saw it."

I pushed her away from me and lifted the laser rifle. Roscoe grabbed my arm.

"There are too many of them," he said.

I pulled my arm savagely away from him. "What do you want me to do?" I shouted at him. "Stand here and let them run us down?"

There were more of them than ever and in any direction one might look. We were surrounded by them. They came surging up on every

side. There was just one big herd of them and we were in the center of it and they all were facing us. They were taking it easy. They were not in any hurry. They had us pegged and they could take us any time they wanted.

Roscoe dropped to his knees and smoothed out a patch of ground with an outstretched palm.

"What the hell!" I yelled.

Surrounded by man-eating monsters and there was Sara, standing transfixed, staring at a doll, and here that bumbling, mumbling idiot down upon his knees, fiddling with equations.

"The world at times makes little sense," said Paint, "but with you and I on guard . . ."

"You keep out of this!" I yelled at him. I had enough to keep an eye on without having to bandy words with a stupid hobby.

I couldn't get them all, of course, but I'd get the most of them. I'd burn them by the thousands into smoking crisps of flesh and I might discourage them. They were brave and confident; they'd never faced a laser gun. They'd go up in puffs of smoke; they'd flare and not be there. Whenever they might take a mind to charge they would pay for it.

But I knew there were too many of them. They were all around us and when they began to move, they'd move on every side.

"Captain Ross," said Roscoe, "I think I finally have it."

"Well, good for you," I said.

Sara moved over close beside me. Her rifle was slung across one shoulder and she had that silly doll clutched against her breast, the way Tuck always carried it.

"Sara," I said, saying what I hadn't meant to say, hadn't planned to say, had scarcely known I wanted to say, my breath catching in my throat like any awkward schoolboy. "Sara, if we get out of this, can you and I start over? Can we start as if I were just coming through that door back on Earth and you waiting in the hall? You were wearing a green dress . . ."

"And you fell in love with me," said Sara, "and then you insulted me and mocked me and I lashed back at you and the entire thing went haywire . . ."

"We fight so well together," I said, "it would be a shame if anything should stop it."

"You're a bully," Sara told me, "and I hated you. There were times I

hated you so hard I could have beat your head in. But thinking back, I guess I loved every minute of it."

"When they come at us," I said, "crouch down out of the line of fire. I'll be shooting in all directions as fast as I . . ."

"There is another way," said Sara. "Tuck used it. The doll. An old race made the doll. A race that understood . . ."

"It's all hogwash!" I yelled. "Tuck was nothing but a freak . . ."

"Tuck understood," she yelled back at me. "He knew how to use the doll. George knew some of it, even with no doll. Hoot would have understood."

Hoot, I thought. Barrel-shaped, pattering, many-legged little scurrier, with a face full of tentacles and three lives to live, now gone forever into his third phase, a part of me and that part gone and if he were here he'd know . . .

Even as I thought it, he was there, welling up inside my brain, as I had known him in that instant when hands and tentacles had clasped and held and we had been as one. It all was there again—all that I had known and felt, all that I had tried to recapture since and could not find again. All the glory and the wonder and some terror, too, for in understanding there must be certain terror. And out of the welter of all the wonder and the knowing, certain facts separated themselves from the mass of it and stood out crystal clear. And I stood there, half myself, half Hoot—and not only Hoot, but all the rest of them there with me, and they there only because of what Hoot had given me, the ability to reach out and grasp and merge with the minds of others, as if for an instant it were not many minds, but a single mind. And myself as well, the forgotten edges of myself, the unplumbed depths of self.

Sara's intuition, the symbolism of the doll coming clear, the philosophic gropings of a hobby flat on his back for centuries, the meaning of the equations Roscoe had been scratching on the ground. And that moment of myself when, half dead, half alive, I had seen the strata in the badlands earthen cliff and had sensed the chronology of them, glimpsing the time and the happenings of this planet that lay exposed within the strata.

Now, quite suddenly, there was a different strata. I saw it as clearly as I had seen the other strata—not myself alone, of course, but myself plus Hoot, plus all the rest of them there with me. There were many universes and many sentient levels and at certain time-space intervals they became apparent and each of them was real, as real as the many

geologic levels that a geologist could count. Except that this was not a matter of counting; it was seeing and sensing and knowing they were there.

The old ones of this planet had known before they had been swept away by the orchardists, had known or sensed imperfectly and had carved upon the face of the doll the wonder and the shock and some of the terror of the knowing. George Smith had known, perhaps far better than any of the rest and Tuck, in his dream-haunted mentality had struck very close to truth before he'd ever found the doll. Roscoe had been beaten into knowing, without recognizing what he knew, by the mallets of the centaurs.

And now, within my brain, it all came together.

The ring of monstrous beasts were charging in upon us in a thunderous rush, their pounding hoofs throwing up a blinding cloud of dust. But they mattered no longer, for they were of another world, of another time and place, and all we had to do was to take one tiny step—not so much to be away from them as to attain a better place, to find a better world.

Not knowing how, but filled with mystic faith, we all took the step out into the infinite unknowing and were there.

It was a place that had a feel of tapestry about it, a feel of unreality and yet a very friendly unreality. It seemed as if it should be a place of silence and of peace, of immobility, that the people who inhabited it were folks who never spoke and that the boat upon the water would never move upon the water—that the village and the river, the trees, the sky, the clouds, the people and the little dogs all were elements of a set piece, woven centuries ago and untouched by time, the colored threads put in place and kept in place for all eternity, frozen and at rest. The sky had a yellowishness about it that was reflected by the water and the humble homes were all brown and brickish-red, the green of the trees not the kind of green one ordinarily would expect, but the very composition one would expect of a hanging on a wall. And yet one could sense in it all a human warmness and an easy welcome and one had the feeling that if he walked down into it he could never leave, but would be bound into its very fabric, blending into the tapestry of it, and such a possibility was good to think upon.

We stood on a rise of ground above the village and the river and all of us were there—all of us except the doll. Sara no longer held the doll. The doll had been left behind, perhaps for someone else to find. The

doll and the weapons. Sara no longer had the rifle, nor I the laser gun. There were rules, I thought. There were certain things, certain attitudes of mind perhaps, that could not be brought into this land.

"Mike," said Sara, softly, "this was the place we hunted. This is the place that Knight was hunting. But he never found it because he never found the doll. Or there was something else he missed. There must be many things that could have led him here."

I put out an arm and held her close against me and she lifted up her face and I kissed her and her eyes were bright with gladness.

"We won't go back," she said. "We'll never think of Earth."

"We can't go back," I said. "There is no way to go."

Although there never would be a need of going. We had left it all behind, all we had ever known before, as a child will leave behind a toy he has outgrown.

The village and the river lay below us and fields and woods stretched away to the far horizons. And I knew, somehow, that this was a world without an end and that it was, as well, the end of time, a place that was everlasting and unchanging, with room for everyone.

Somewhere in this land were Smith and Tuck and maybe even Hoot, but we'd probably never find them for we'd not seek for them. The distances were far and there'd be no urge to travel.

The unreality was gone, although the tapestry still remained. And the boat did move upon the water with a flashing of the oars. Boys and girls and dogs, yelling and barking, were running up the hill to greet us and the people in the village all had turned around to stare up at us and some of them were waving.

"Let us go down to meet them," Sara said.

The four of us, abreast, went down the hill to enter into another life.