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THE GREEN QUEEN

Was she mistress of miracles or puppet of super-science?

MARGARET ST. CLAIR

Complete Novel

HIS ATOMIC PUPPET WAS OUT OF CONTROL!

Bonnar had created the Green Queen thoughtlessly—all part of a day's work. But when his brain-child became a full-grown Frankenstein, a monster embodied in the girl he loved, Bonnar was terrified. For now she threatened to shatter the whole carefully balanced social structure of Viridis—as well to undermine that radioactive world's atomic shield!

Only Bonnar could end the holocaust and turn the all-too-grim reality back to the illusion he had originally intended. But to do that he had to destroy the girl he loved—or be destroyed by her.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

BONNAR

He was a mask-maker fooled by his own mask.

LEAF AMADEUS

Was she a queen or a fraud, a savior—or a destroyer?

CAROLINE AUGLINGER

She was a seamstress who embroidered her own shroud.

HORVENDILE

He was the man behind the throne of a dangerous queen.

MERAKIS

Who was this monarch whose power could rule a planet eons after her death?

CANDIA

She had to be a mother—even if it meant giving up her children.

The Green Queen

MARGARET ST. CLAIR

ACE BOOKS
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Prologue in Shalom:

"She said, 'The one who loved me is dead. And the one who loved power goes on living.' What do you suppose she meant by that?"

Bonnar had spoken in a distant, introspective tone, not like a man who expects an answer. Now, without looking at Jeff, he picked up the smoky, almost-empty liquor glass from the lead-topped bar counter and drank the last few drops.

He had, Jeff thought, been drinking when Jeff had first gone to his office, about eleven o'clock that morning. That had been four hours ago. He ought, by now, to be showing some sign of the cargo he had taken on, even of such a superior intoxicant as ethel-eugenool. But he didn't seem to have gotten anything at all out of his steady, quiet drinking, not even the slight depression that usually followed the initial euphoric action of eth.

Bonnar had, of course, gotten something out of it. Underneath his quietness there was a desperation that clung to the intoxicant as if it represented normality—as if, without it, he would be swept over the edge of reality into a hysteria

so profound that he would never be able to claw his way up to the surface of it. Well, reality on Viridis could be painful enough. But the hysteria was something new.

Hysteria. Hysteria was in the air. Hysteria rode the streets of Shalom and peered out of every face, distorted and stony-eyed. Where were they going, the silent, hurrying people in the crowds on the tree-lined avenues? Shalom had always been an unhappy city, with the oppressed air of the capital that is heavily policed. Now the sense of oppression, of repression, was gone. An explosive hysteria had taken its place.

Bonnar rapped on the bar. The barman put down the glass from which he had been drinking and sidled toward them. There were big flat scars and pock-marks on his hands and face. He must, Jeffery thought, be a Lower who had somehow managed to make the enormous jump from Lower to Body-servant—and that quite recently. But the man's venturing to drink in front of them wasn't at all like a Body-servant. It was an almost unbelievable freedom, in Shalom. Many things must have changed.

Bonnar pushed his glass toward the attendant. "More eth," he said.

The barman's fingers went out. Then he dropped the smoke-gray glass so that it rolled over on its side. "Get your own eth," he said sharply. "I'm going out on the street. Where everybody else is. I want to know what's been happening."

He came out from behind the counter. He unhooked his white cover-up and dropped it on the floor. Head high, face glassy and fixed, he ran toward the door.

For a moment Jeffery was too amazed to speak. Then he said, "Look here, Bonnar, what is all this? What's happened in Shalom, anyhow?"

"Eh?" Bonnar had reached over the counter for the eth bottle and was filling his glass from it, holding the bottle carefully in both big hands.

"I said, what's happened? When I was in Shalom six months ago, it was—well—the way Shalom's always been. A place where ten percent of the population monopolized eighty percent of the dwelling space and fifty percent of the unpolluted food, and where everybody, Uppers and Lowers alike, was always terribly afraid of damage from the omnipresent radioactive elements in the soil. Viridis, the green planet, was red-hot, and Shalom was its nervous capital. An anxious, frightened place."

" 'Shalom, City of Fear,' " Bonnar put in. "That's the title of a book an Earthman wrote about us. We've always had bad publicity."

"Yes, that expresses it. And now—it's almost incredible how different the city feels. It's not full of fear any longer, but of hysteria. The great social distinctions seem to have crumbled, or to be crumbling. The Body-servants don't act like Body-servants. I even thought I saw a number of Lowers on the Upper-level streets."

"You did. But they've had a little more to eat and some of their lesions have healed, so they don't look so much like Lowers any more."

"Is that it? As I was saying, I've been out in the field for the last six months. In a lead suit a lot of the time. No radio."

"No. We never had radio."

"When I get back to Shalom with some, uhm, discoveries, I find all this." Jeffery made a gesture. "I've been trying to ask you all day. What's happened? Certainly something has been happening."

"You're a Foundation man, aren't you?" Bonnar asked.

"Yes. From Ford."

"A professional do-gooder." Bonnar poured the last of the eth from the bottle. He looked around and then, seeing that he and Jeffery were quite alone in the bar, threw the bottle on the floor. It landed with a clunk, and rolled. "One of the boys who run around to the local people with a satchel full of surveys, and monkey manners, telling the locals where to head in. Eh?"

Jeff kept his temper. That was part of his professional equipment, and besides, he had the impression that Bonnar's insolence was not so much meant as aggression as it was a means of keeping him in touch with reality. Aggression was a refuge from hysteria. "We try to help, yes," he answered. "If we derive information that we think can profitably be imparted, then we publicize it. We give advice if we're asked to give it. We don't interfere."

"Is that why you came to my office this morning?" Bonnar demanded. "Because you thought that I, as a professional mask-maker of some standing, could be useful in getting your information 'publicized'?" He laughed. "If you knew all that's been happening! Was that it?"

Jeffery sighed. No purpose would be served by telling Bonnar that his was the fourth office Jeff had visited this morning, and the first where he had found anybody in. "Yes, that's about it."

"Well, the masks are gone. Permanently gone, I expect. I've lost my profession. Certainly Verbal mask is passé—Veridical might possibly survive as a form of entertainment. Did you know the masks were gone? I can see you didn't. And the barrier is down. That means that a quarter or so of the population of Shalom, not being hemmed in any longer by the barrier, has spread out into the fields on the

outside of the barrier. You're going to have trouble 'publicizing the information' you've derived now that Verbal mask is gone and so many people aren't in the city any more."

Bonnar nodded to himself, chewing on his lip. "I wish I hadn't been so thoroughly identified with the Queen's party," he said. "Still, it might turn out to be an advantage. The trouble is, one simply can't tell which way the cat is going to jump."

"What cat?" asked Jeffery. "I don't know what the cat is, and somehow I don't feel that you really give a damn about which way it jumps. Something else is bothering you." He studied Bonnar for a minute. He saw a big-framed, not unhandsome blond man, the body beginning to get a little soft, a little slack. The blue eyes were flat and opaque. But the mouth communicated more. Set, and stiff, and tired, it yet longed to talk.

"What cat?" Jeffery repeated. "And you spoke about the masks being gone. I don't supposed anybody who hasn't lived on Viridis for a long sime can really know all that is—was—meant by Verbal mask. But I understood it enough to know that it was the way the Upper ten percent kept the Lower ninety from actively revolting against their miseries.

"That was always the oddest feature of Viridian social life, the one that most puzzled outsiders—the way that the Uppers hated and despised the Lowers because they didn't earn their living, and yet actively fought the slightest attempt on the part of the Lowers to become productive workers. They were condemned to semi-starvation as parasites.

"But that's by the by. As I was saying, I know enough to understand that the mask's being gone is a serious bus-

iness. You say the barrier is down. That's incredible. Isn't Shalom afraid of radioactivity in the soil and air any longer? That's what the barrier was supposed to protect against. And what was the Queen's party? I never heard of a Queen on Viridis before.

"Look here, Bonnar, why don't you tell me what's been happening? I think you want to talk—you've been sidling up to it all day, and then sidling away again. When I was out in the field I found something. I think it ought to be publicized, though it might have considerable economic repercussions. I don't know whether, under present conditions, it *can* be publicized at all. Tell me what's been happening. You want to talk anyway. Help me to decide."

Bonnar got up and went around behind the bar. He stopped and rummaged. He came up with a bottle of eth. "Plenty more there," he said grinning. "We'll not die of thirst, anyway."

He filled both their glasses, and then came around to sit by Jeff. "I had my own interests to think of," he said after a minute. "You understand how it was?" He shot a challenging glance at Jeff. "I didn't just go off and leave her. I asked her again and again to come back with me. But she couldn't. And I was afraid to wait any longer. So I came back."

"Yes, tell me all about it from the beginning, Bonnar. I want to know everything." Jeff's voice was soft.

The bar was very quiet. From the street there came the confused, rather high-pitched murmur that had been going on all day. It seemed a little louder than it had.

Bonnar took a gulp of eth. "I don't suppose it would do any harm to get my version. No, not at all. All right, I'll tell you. All the part I saw."

He began to talk. And, as he talked, Jeffery felt that

the events of the past few months were spreading themselves before his eyes, not as Bonnar had seen them—not even, perhaps, as they had objectively occurred—but as they would have been if he, Jeffery, had been present invisibly, as a witness, as he would have seen, heard, smelled, tasted, felt.

Section One: The Mask

Chapter 1

"THERE ARE only about a million people on Viridis," Bonnar said. "They went through the cards. . . ."

The penetrating pale green daylight of Viridis had been shut away behind long curtains, and the big room was golden in the glow of pendant ceiling-lights. Except for the soft whirr and click of the ibim as it sorted the dossier cards, there was no noise.

The ibim, though not a new model, was fast. It had been sorting for some twenty minutes, and it had got through nearly half of the 400,500 cards that represented the feminine population of Viridis. But the basket marked "Hold" was still quite empty. The man in the dark blue uniform sighed.

The man in the strictly-tailored gray tunic who was standing beside him waited attentively. He did not venture to speak. The machine continued its soft, unproductive whirring. The third man in the room coughed nervously, and then looked about him as if wondering to whom he ought to apologize.

The moments ebbed. Once more the seated man in the blue uniform sighed. The "Hold" basket stayed empty. At last, with a final soft click, the ibim stopped. It had gone through all the cards. A red light flashed.

The man in the gray tunic said, "Excuse me, sir. But it occurs to me that perhaps we're setting our sights too high."

"Possibly," replied the man in dark blue. "Let's see, now. Physical requirements—no, we daren't compromise any more on them. The physical requirements are the essence of the thing. Residence—what length of residence on Viridis were we asking for?"

"Ten years, sir," the gray-tuniced man answered.

"Ten years—ah, that's a little excessive. Have it reset to—let's say—three years. She ought to have absorbed a good deal of Viridian feeling in even that length of time."

The third man was already busy changing ibim's wiring.

"Now, about psychic traits," the seated man continued. "It appears to me that we may have been a trifle over-strict in requiring that she be intelligent. What do you think, McPherson?" The man in blue was fond of asking the opinion of his subordinates; he liked the saving touch of informality it gave.

"I doubt she need be, really, sir," Gray Tunic answered deferentially. "Provided she's suggestible and docile. But I do think—" he coughed twice, sharply, and cleared his throat—"I think we'd better be sure that she has the histrionic ability. I mean, sir, that that's almost as much a part of the role as the physical requirements."

"I'm not so sure," the seated man answered. Gray Tunic blinked. His face, which was rather pale, may have turned a little paler.

"After all, if she believes in what she's doing," the seated man said, "—and that's essential—she'll have to go through all sorts of tests—she'll handle the role adequately without any histrionic flare at all. Eh?" He looked up at Gray Tunic almost mischeviously.

"Oh, certainly, I quite agree. Your point's very well taken, sir."

"But we'll try it with the histrionicity left in this time," Blue Uniform said, relenting. "We'll lower the intelligence requirement, though."

"*Yes,* sir." The man in the gray tunic ran his finger around inside his collar. He gave an unnecessary order to the third man.

This time the ibim had been talking to itself for only a few minutes when a card popped out. Gray Tunic reached forward for it, and then stopped. He put his hands back by his sides and waited respectfully while the rest of the dossier cards clicked on by. Two thirds of the cards had been sorted when another one popped up into the basket. That was all. The red light came on.

"Let's see what we've got," said the man in the dark blue uniform, heavily.

"Yes, sir." A strictly tailored gray arm went out.

"Read them to me," the seated man said lazily.

"Yes, sir." He cleared his throat. "Amadeus, Leaf," he said.

The eyebrows of the man in the dark blue uniform went up a little. "Pretty name," he commented. "And oddly appropriate."

"Yes, sir. I mean, it certainly is. Amadeus, Leaf. Age 27. Height 5′6″. Weight 109 pounds. Build, slender. Eyes, green. Skin color, very fair. Hair, dark red."

"She sounds first-rate on the physical requirements,"

the seated man commented. "A little short, that's all. I wonder why we didn't get her card before."

"I think it's the residence requirements, sir. She's only been on Viridis a little over three years."

"Ah. Well, go on."

"Occupation, apprentice mask-maker in the veridical division. Planet of origin, Terra. History, born in Northern Hemisphere on Terra, educated in California, married at 17. Gave birth at 18, baby died, no other children known. Marriage dissolved by common consent after death of child. No recorded marriages or love affairs since that time."

"That's odd," the seated man commented.

"Yes, it is. Oh, I see down at the end of the card a written-in notation, 'Said to be a close friend of Bonnar in Verbal.' "

"That's better. I doubt we could use a really cold type."

Gray Tunic laughed dutifully. "Then there's some stuff about her hobbies—she's fond of reading and maskart—"

"Probably why she came to Viridis. We don't get many earth immigrants, you know."

"No, sir. Viridis has had bad publicity on earth."

"Go on."

"And then the dossier goes into her heredity. Oh. Something unusual, sir. It seems her great-grandmother was half Alpha Proximian. By art-sem."

"Really! Her great-great grandmother must have been infatuated with eugenics to try a cross like that. And a hasty woman, too. If I remember my history correctly, the whole enthusiasm about A*Proximians as sires lasted only about three months. After that some of the disadvantages of the strain became visible. I suppose that's where she gets that dark red hair."

"Probably, sir. It might even be the reason why she lost her child. It was a cross with disadvantages."

"Um-huh. What's the psychological estimate?"

"Intelligent, stubborn, suggestible, humanitarian. Some degree of ESP. Amorous temperament. And at the bottom, the interviewer's written, 'Should be able to play a part.'"

The man in the dark blue uniform relaxed. "She sounds like our meat, except for the stubbornness. And she would be stubborn, with a heredity like that—What's on the other card?"

"Auglinger, Caroline. Age 35. Height 5′8″. Weight, 144. Build, medium. Eyes, hazel. Skin color, medium. Hair, Titian red."

"A little old, and not so well suited physically. But go on."

"On Viridis since birth. Old Viridian family, came here in Jovis migration. Educated here. Occupation, embroiderer."

"That's a Body-servant occupation," Blue Uniform interrupted. "That's not an insuperable objection, though. Any marks or scars?"

"No, sir. You remember, scarlessness was one of the conditions we set up."

"That's right, it was. What about her personal history and the psychological estimate?"

"She's been married three times, the first when she was twenty-five. First husband was suspected of being a risen Lower—at any rate, he died in the second year. The other two marriages were ended by common consent. She had two children by the third spouse. She's not married at present, and seems to have no affairs."

"Um. Normal Body-servant history, except for the first marriage. What boxes has the interviewer checked in the psychological estimate?"

"Credulous, docile, conservative, nearly average intelligence. Average sexual drive. Oh, and the interviewer has written in, 'Fond of dramatizing herself and her troubles.' "

"Oh, dear. Did the person who punched those cards consider *that* histrionicity? Hand the dossiers to me."

Gray Tunic obeyed deferentially. The man in the dark blue uniform studied the cards for five minutes or so, whistling very softly to himself.

"Well, I don't think there can be much doubt of it," he said at last. "Leaf is the one. The only advantage Caroline has over her is that she would be easier to control. But I rather doubt that Caroline would be worth controlling. I'll have to take it up with the council, of course. But I imagine we'll select Leaf."

"Yes, sir."

A similiar sorting, and for a similar purpose, went on a night or two later under quite different circumstances. These sorters worked in a room that was almost completely dark, at the level of Shalom's sewer system. They were shut away, both from the moon-bright radiance that the ionizing layer in the Viridian atmosphere gave the night sky, and from the glow of Shalom's sodium vapor street lights. Light might have betrayed them. Even as it was, they were worried about the amount of power their ibim—an older model than the one Blue Uniform and Gray Tunic had used, but one which had been rewired to be quite fast—was using.

"Yes, but what could they do to us, after all?" said the tall man with the big nose, carrying on the conversation. "We're a legal organization."

"We're a legal *cult*, you mean," the shorter man corrected. "We haven't any business at all to be having a machine

like this. As to what they could do to us—do you want to have to take a walk down the Stairs?"

"They wouldn't," the tall man said quickly and nervously. "There's been no real crime, and our cult's useful. In all the time Viridis has been settled, an Upper has had to go down the Stairs only twice. Anyhow, stop worrying. Our ibim is pulling less current than a heater would. There's nothing for them to get suspicious about."

"Three flights down, and it begins," the shorter man said hatefully. "Four hundred thousand people packed into a space that wouldn't be comfortable for as many dogs. Almost no barrier protection. A life span that averages thirty years. And polluted food. Have you realized what that means, polluted food? Knowing that every mouthful you eat is increasing the deposit of radioactive particles in your bones? Oh yes, it's a real picnic, having to take that little walk down Stairs."

"Oh, shut up. When you joined us, you made some promises. Serious ones. Are you forgetting them? What we're doing is important, the logical next step.—Here comes another card."

In the very dim light the two men studied the duplicates of the cards that Blue Uniform and Gray Tunic had studied. They discussed them quite fully. And in the end, just as Blue Uniform had done, they settled on Leaf.

Bonnar stood in his office looking out the window. It was in a poor part of town, too near the Stairs that led down to the Lowers' habits, and he disliked it. But Verbal mask, which was designed primarily for the consolation and manipulation of Lowers, never had the prestige of Veridical. Its practitioners always got the short end of the stick.

Notwithstanding that, he had been successful, rather

outstandingly so, as a mask-maker. His somewhat heavy face brightened for a moment. Then it sank back into its normal stolidity. There might be such a thing as being too successful, mightn't there? He was beginning to think that there was.

It was fashionable to jeer at Verbal as compared to Veridical. Well, Verbal was the older—it went back to the days of James Renfrew, leader of the first of the three big Jovis migrations, who had spoken of "Fable, the kindly mask over the face of Jovis, our angry God,"—and in Bonnar's opinion Verbal was the more respectable. It was also the more useful. Except for the big Veridical displays in Tandis park every second year, when were Lowers ever really in contact with Veridical? It was a minor factor in their lives. Verdical existed to alleviate the strain of *Upper* life, to put a mask over *its* anxiety.

Verbal did seem simple compared with Veridical. He granted that. He'd heard it called a rumor shop. Actually, it was full of subtleties. One could call it the art of inducing consoling belief.

How many hours he'd spent listening at the ventilating shafts from down Stairs, trying to learn, from the talk, the coughing, the spitting, the groans, what new mask it would be possible to implant! How much care he expended on his disseminators, drilling them to use the exact, the perfect word, without ever letting them know that they were being drilled! (Secrecy was essential; if the Lowers ever learned that the frantic beliefs that consoled their misery came from up Stairs, the efficacy of the mask would be lost.) Theme—vehicles—details—coloring. All tremendously important. A false detail could spoil even the best conceived mask. But the final subtlety of perception was demanded of

the maskmaker in knowing when the old mask had failed and a new one must be begun.

Misgauge that—let the Lowers go for three days without the alleviating veil of Verbal maskart over their ocean of miseries—and the whole social structure of Viridis would crack from side to side.

A responsible art, and a subtle one. Didn't it, after all, make Veridical, with its somewhat artificial emphasis on beauty, its projectors, lenses, sense impressors, look barren and mechanical?

He didn't see how anyone could answer that question with any word except *yes*. And yet a mask could be too successful. He was beginning to think that was what was wrong with the current one.

It must have met Lower psychological needs to a greater degree than anybody in Verbal had anticipated. A Lower had been killed in a food robbery the other day, near one of the pollution-clear warehouses. They'd blasted him, naturally. But the last words he'd shrieked from his blistered mouth had been, "She's coming! The Green Queen!" Had a Lower, ever before, died like that?

And not only among Lowers; it was beginning to get into Upper culture too. In the last month or so he'd heard of a symphony, two poems and a statue, all concerned with the Green Queen. The people one met at dinner parties added details to the legend. And yet Bonnar had come up with the basic mask idea, himself, not more than six months ago, and had done most of the work on it himself. It was curiously convincing; sometimes he wondered whether he had ever actually invented it—whether it hadn't, somehow, been distilled out of the soft air, or been exhaled from the damp soil of Viridis like a mist. He must have touched, have tapped, something much more powerful than he had realized.

There was a soft but oddly repulsive plop from the room behind him. He turned round, his face puckered with disgust. Yes, it was. One of the flying frogs. Dull gun-metal gray, the color of the sole of an old shoe, it was flopping frenziedly around the lamp on his table. How could it have gotten in?

Through the dome, the barrier, his skylight? And yet there it was, plopping and leaping repulsively.

He didn't want to touch it; it might carry fungus spores. With a net he scooped it up and dumped it down the chute. Then he turned back to the window and his thoughts.

Mightn't it be desirable to begin another mask? Yes, though the old one hadn't even begun to fail—was, in fact, stronger than ever. Desirable, certainly. But could it be done? Bonnar's eyebrows rose a little as the phrase—the definitive phrase—came into his mind. *The mask was getting out of hand.*

He didn't know why the explicitness of the words should be so startling. Their content had been latent in his mind for a long time. And there must be other instances of an overly persistent mask in the history of Verbal. There might even have been techniques worked out for dealing with such a situation. He'd look the subject up and see what could be done after he had finished his interview with Leaf. All the same, *the mask was getting out of hand.*—There must be something more pleasant for him to think about than this.

About breaking off with Leaf? He didn't really want to break off. Their relationship had lasted some three months now—longer than anything had since he was seventeen—and he wasn't really tired of her yet. She had an attractive person, of course. (But so did a lot of other women. He'd had a little Lower girl once who was really charming. She would have done for a model in Veridical. But the next week the pustules had broken out on her.) Leaf was ardent. That was

very nice, delightful, in fact, after the luke-warm response one got from Body-servants and even from some Uppers. But it wasn't these two things alone that made him like her. It was something more personal. Directness? Freedom? Spontaneity? Perhaps it was because she was from earth; she was the first earthgirl he had ever had. Or perhaps it was because she was Leaf.

No, he wasn't eager to break with her. But he had had an order. A man didn't rise to his position in his profession without being able to obey. He hoped he could get Leaf to do what she was supposed to do.

Bonnar was suddenly profoundly depressed. It was the view from the window; he'd always disliked it. Naturally it was depressing. The pale green light, the flat pavement that was the exact mud color of a flying frog, the ceaseless agitation of the writhing trees. (Why did he dislike the trees so much? Fairfield, also in Verbal, had done a most successful mask dealing with them. And yet Bonnar hated them, was bothered more by them every time he saw them. Their tormented writhings, no matter how much they might have deserved to suffer, were hideous. The red fruit they bore was delicious, but for years he hadn't been able to touch it. They affected him, he supposed, the way Lowers did some people. And yet Lowers didn't disturb him much.)

A wave of motion passed along the line of trees; there was a writhing tree not more than twenty-five feet from his office window. Ugh. With sudden energy Bonnar went to the big square cupboard in the corner and got out a three-sense veridicial projector. There was no reason why he should see the trees writhing if he didn't want to.

He began to fuss with lenses and controls. Veridicial did, for the full effect, depended a great deal on the skill and the psychological attitude of the operator, but Bonnar could

get by. He was good enough that he didn't have to use a previously recorded roll.

Slowly and with a semblance of effort the mask began to spread out. The windows of the office faded. The writhing trees wavered and then, as if sheets of gauze were coming down that gradually grew more solid, became a rank of blossoming apple trees. The backless bench under the trees on the corner turned to a grassy bank. There was a dusting of purple violets at its foot.

So far, so good. It needed more grass, and some little plants, irises maybe, by the trunks of the trees. (Bonnar's family had been of Viridis for a long time. They had come there before the Jovis migration. Yet Bonnar, when he made the mask he wanted, made the flora of earth.) A brook—no, a spring— over to the left. A bright blue sky. More flowers in the grass—hoop-petticoat daffodils, and some low white California irises with gold on the petals. Clouds in the sky, puffy and slowly drifting. A breeze, not warm, not cool, like a caress from a skillful, loving hand. Anything else? Perfume from the apple blossoms, sweet and faint. That was about it.

Bonnar stood back from the projector, admiring his handiwork. There it was, a spring day on earth, beginning at his windows. And very nice.

Of course, it lacked the precision and clarity that a really good veridical would have had. It lacked organization. It wasn't five-sense. It was full of holes, really. But it was nice.

Leaf came forward, smiling under the apple trees, to him.

Bonnar's heart began to pound. She was, as always, less beautiful, more individual, than he had imagined her. She had an excellent figure, but the only really beautiful thing about her was her hair. After her baby had died, she had had

rather a hard time, and the experience had left marks on her. And yet, as she moved under the apple trees toward him, there was a vitality in her that made his projected fantasy of terrestrial springtime as unreal as the sugar constructions on a cake.

He switched off the projector; he must remember to ask her whether the mask had been visible at all from her side. He swallowed and inhaled. Funny, he couldn't seem to get enough air into his lungs. But of course he had to do what he had been directed to do.

She left his office a quarter of an hour later. Bonnar watched her from the window. Now that the interview he had been dreading was over, he should have felt better, but he didn't. He was feeling shaken and a little sick. He went to the cupboard from which he had gotten the mask projector, and rummaged about until he found an ethel eugenool bottle. He poured himself a big drink.

He couldn't stay away from the window. Drink in hand, he went back to it. Leaf was moving down the street slowly, toward the writhing trees. When she came to the backless bench on the corner, she sat down on it.

She had turned white—a greenish, ghastly white—when he had told her he didn't want to go on with her. "But I thought you lo—" she had said, and then bit off the words. She had been too proud to argue. But when he had suggested that she might find consolation, at least temporarily, in one of the religious cults, "for instance, The Apple Pickers," (he had congratulated himself on the delicacy with which the name had been implanted), she had looked at him as if he were something outrageous, a creature utterly outside her experience. She had laughed on a high note. And when she had turned toward the door to go, she had put one

hand in front of herself almost gropingly, as if she had suddenly become blind.

Could he have done anything else? No, of course not. If he hadn't broken off with her willingly, pressure would have been put on him—until he *had* done it. It wouldn't have helped Leaf any for him to refuse. But he might have told her, mightn't he, that he didn't want to do it? That he was being forced to act?

Bonnar blinked, and then shook his head. No, he couldn't have. Leaf had to do what was expected of her. That she didn't know, and mustn't know what it was, didn't alter the issue. The great thing was discipline, authority. He had yielded to it. And so must Leaf, even though she yielded ignorantly.

He couldn't leave the window. He wanted to forget about Leaf, now the interview was over, and get back down to his work. He wanted to stop feeling unhappy, and even a little guilty, for having done what was definitely the right thing to do. But as long as Leaf was sitting there on the bench, bent over as if the green light oppressed her, her hands over her face, it was impossible. He had to keep watching her, if only to know what she would do.

He finished his drink, and poured another one. Once Leaf picked up her macquillage kit—it was hanging from a strap around her waist—and opened it. But she put it down again, as if the task of making up her face just now was too much for her.

He fidgeted. Wasn't she ever going to go on about her business? There was a shrine of the Apple Pickers in the next street; he could just see it if he leaned far to one side. If Leaf went into it, it meant that his delicately implanted suggestion had worked. Of course, even if she didn't, she might become interested in the cult later. The people who

had told Bonnar he must break off his relationship with the girl had subtle but effective ways of influencing people.

At last Leaf straightened. She opened the kit and made up her face rather thoroughly. Her face was toward Bonnar, but she did seem to be feeling a little better. He was glad of that.

The branches of the tree were moving restlessly. One of the pendant dark red fruit was shaken loose by the motion. It fell on the ground at Leaf's feet with an almost audible plop. Leaf looked up, toward the trunk of the tree. She must have seen the writing on the bark at nearly the same moment that it caught Bonnar's eye.

It was spelled out letter by letter, as if some invisible hand were writing, and in ink of glowing liquid gold. "The Apple Pickers are coming," it read. The slightest of pauses. And then, "Be ready," was added to the legend on the bark.

Bonnar felt a superstitious thrill that was almost fright. Then common sense reasserted itself. It was the government, of course. The people who had told him to break off with Leaf. They had a projector somewhere; there wasn't anything supernatural about it; it didn't make any difference that he couldn't make an accurate guess as to where the projector was located.

He wasn't altogether sure the projector was a good idea. Leaf was stubborn. She was really exceedingly stubborn. If she had known, for instance, that he wasn't quite ready to break off his relationship with her, she would never have acquiesced in it. And if she once got the idea that somebody was trying to make her enter the Apple Pickers, she would never go near one of their shrines. Nothing outside of superior physical force would compel her.

The words faded from the bark, a letter at a time. They faded in the order in which they had appeared. Leaf was

looking at the tree intently, her head a little tipped, her back stiff. New letters began to appear.

This time the gold was darker, with streaks of black and ominous red in it. And the message—Bonnar frowned—the message was darker too. "There's a serpent in every bushel of apples that we pick," it ran.

Well, it might appeal to Leaf's curiosity. The message did avoid the pitfall of making the Apple Pickers seem too attractive. But the trouble was that Leaf had almost no curiosity. She never asked questions or pried. It seemed a mistake to try to bait her through a quality she didn't have.

He had better watch his thoughts. This wasn't a good way to feel about people in authority.

The message stayed a little longer on the bark than the earlier one had done. Then it disappeared all at once, as if the projector had been switched off.

Leaf got up from the bench. She looked around her for a moment, as if she had forgotten something and couldn't remember what it was. Then she began to move down the street, in the direction of the Apple Pickers' shrine.

Bonnar let his breath out in relief. It wasn't sure yet, of course. But she could have taken another way home, and she hadn't. Yes, it did look. . . .

He watched her, his body pressed against the glass. She was walking rapidly and jerkily, not at all like Leaf. He had always rather enjoyed watching her walk, since her movements were smooth and assured. Now, even in the midst of his curiosity, he was conscious of a certain distress. It was unpleasant to see Leaf moving without grace.

The street was empty, except for her and a Lower. The Lower was a man in his thirties, though of course he looked much older. There were two big pustules on his chest, some fungus on his legs, and he was exceedingly thin. He

was so thin that his knee caps made big bulges and his spine was as sharp as the backbone of a fish. He'd been trying to cut his radioactive intake, of course. That was why he was so thin. But they oughtn't to allow Lowers in that condition on an Upper-level street.

Leaf was abreast of the shrine now. She wasn't slowing her pace. Her head was bent. She wasn't looking where she was going.

She didn't bump into the Lower; it was not so crude as that. The edge of his kilt brushed her hand; perhaps she smelled him, too. She looked up, startled.

She made an involuntary gesture of repulsion and disgust. The Lower looked away from her wearily. And as if a spring in her had been pressed, she turned and entered the shrine.

Bonnar had a sharp sense of anti-climax. It oughtn't to have been like that. Had she turned into the shrine merely to avoid the Lower, or was it because the slogans on the tree had roused her curiosity? Or had the emotional gap left by his rejection of her motivated her action? It was impossible to say.

He turned from the window to his desk. He'd see what he could find out about mask-persistence. There were two or three questions—and possible sources for answers to them. . . . He began to write on a pad.

He put the brush down after a moment. Why was it so important that Leaf enter the Apple Pickers? As far as he knew, it was a cult like any other one. Most cults were managed by former Body-servants who, in catering to the Uppers' craving for theological novelty, managed to put themselves on a precarious psychological equality with their lords. Sometimes the same Body-servant would pop up in cult after cult. Bonnar himself had always privately thought

that the prevalence of cults was a certain indictment of the effectiveness of Veridical maskart. He couldn't see any reason why it was desirable for Leaf to enter *this* cult.

Oh, let it go. It wasn't his place to see any reason, provided his superiors did. And Leaf had done what he had been trying to make her do. She had gone into the shrine. Her subsequent actions were no concern of his. He didn't suppose he would ever see her again.

Chapter 2

"I KNEW I couldn't be objective about it," Bonnar said. "And they wanted an objective report. If I couldn't influence her, they'd send somebody else. So I tried to control. . . ."

"What do you *want?*" the Lower asked desperately. His body was wet with sweat, and his face glistened with the tears he had shed in his pain. "What do you Uppers want from us? You come down Stairs, down to our habits, and hurt us. You twist our arms and hit us and take our women. Sometimes you do worse than that. But you're never satisfied. You always want something we can't give. If we knew what it was, we'd try to give it. What do you *want?*"

Bonnar paused for a moment. In the deep green light—always deeper, always greener, below Stairs—the Lower's sweaty body seemed to give off star-like reflections, to have the green-silk shimmer of Sirius. Was he sweating because Bonnar had hurt him? The mouth's twist, in the dim light, might express much beside pain.

"Be quiet," he ordered briefly.

"But what do you wan—Oh. Please. Oh." The tears began to run down the Lower's face, gently and uncontrollably.

There was an art to these things. Bonnar sighted scientifically, squinting in the dimness. Did the Lower's question mean anything? No, fortunately. He didn't have to answer it. It was no more than an exclamation of pain would have been, quite meaningless. "You know what I want," he said

through his teeth. He tapped the Lower, lightly but accurately.

The Lower began to sob, no longer noiselessly. Bonnar hit him again.

An hour later, Bonnar was up Stairs once more. His face was flushed, and his jaw was set. The visit to the Lower had ended, as visits there always seemed to end, in a generalized frustration and dismay. He hadn't got what he had wanted. And even if he had brought a woman back with him, it would have been the same. A Lower woman might seem an outlet, but she wasn't. On other visits—but this time the sense of disappointment was keener than it had ever been before.

All the same, he'd have stayed down Stairs a little longer if the prick-dial on his wrist hadn't warned him that he was exceeding the limits of permissible exposure. It was a little satisfaction, though a poor one, to think that the Lower would remember him for a good many days.

Now what should he do? A woman, say a Body-servant? Oh, God. In the weeks after Leaf had—left him (it was odd that the affair presented itself so. He had certainly got rid of her, not she of him. And yet he always felt that she had deserted him)—in those first few weeks, there had been a good many girls. They blurred together into a tasteless whole. Light or dark, slim or plump, short or tall, they smelled the same, felt the same, acted the same.

And if they didn't act the same, the differences made no difference. Eager or indifferent, their response had never seemed a response to *him*. There had been an acceptance in Leaf, a deeper femininity, that—

He had been walking along steadily enough, headed for a decontamination stall. It was always a wise precaution

after being below Stairs. Now he halted, transfixed by a sudden idea.

It was a simple enough idea, though it had been eluding him for the last three or four days, ever since he had known about Horvendile. But now he knew what was wrong, why his judgement seemed so biased that he felt he couldn't trust himself to fill out the report. He was jealous of Leaf.

Oh, no. No, he couldn't be. Jealousy was a Lower emotion. They might stick knives in each other over women or even food rations; but an Upper was immune from personal jealousy, though he might be—ought to be—jealous of his caste's power or his profession's prestige. Bonnar could *prove* he wasn't jealous. If he really had a jealous nature, wouldn't he have suffered more when he had let Leaf go?

There was a decontamination stall, of a rather old-fashioned architectural style, just ahead. It was studded with arabesques of the small, cracked diamonds, that had been so much in vogue ten or fifteen years ago. Bonnar stepped inside, pulling the fastenings on his clothes.

Robot hands reached out. With clumsy accuracy they undressed him. His discarded clothing dropped into a disposal unit. Warm soapy water began to pour down. Bonnar stepped under it.

The bath momentarily relaxed his tension. The warm, sweet-smelling flood seemed to wash away his self-questioning. He stood under it with mindless pleasure. But as the bath cooled and became astringent his doubts returned. Parting with Leaf hadn't been painful, no. But he hadn't been jealous of her then. There hadn't been anybody else.

The shower shut off. If Bonnar had wanted it repeated, he could have pressed another button, but he was tired of soapy water. He stood quietly while the bath robot dried

him. A packet of clean, warm clothes plopped out of a slot. Bonnar opened it and began to dress.

His really personal belongings were on a table to the right of the shower in a pouch. He had put the pouch there when he had pulled the fastenings on his clothes. Now he hung it around his neck again.

When he had first got the notice directing him, in formal, official language, to "resume the acquaintance of Miss Leaf Amadeus," he had been pleased. But not too pleased. Certainly not *too* pleased. He was feeling rather tired of women, just then, and . . . But he had looked her up.

She had moved. He had had rather a time finding her. Her new place had been on the edge of town, near the barrier, a location that wasn't considered especially desirable. She had lived near Tandis Park before, a park that was outstanding for its daily displays of veridical.

She had changed. When she came to the door, he hardly knew her. Her hair was the same, but her face was smoother and more filled out, and she moved with a more deliberate grace than he was used to in her.

"Oh—it's Bonnar," she said. "Come on in." She had smiled, but he had been uncomfortably aware that she wasn't especially glad to see him. She turned and led him into the maskart room. She did move more slowly than she used to, and hadn't she lost weight? Even though her face was fuller? He knew so well how her body was.

In the maskart room there had been a man, seated, quite at his ease. That had been a real shock, a real jar. Horvendile. Bonnar had hated him as soon as he saw him. Horvendile. . . .

Bonnar was finished dressing now. His old clothes would be laundered and checked for residual radioactivity. If they were usable he'd get a credit for them. If not, they'd

be destroyed. The contamination problem was a constant nuisance, if not quite a danger, even to Uppers.

Horvendile had been seated on the heavy, square-framed k'ang, his feet out straight in front of him. (About a third of the people who had come to Viridis in the first Jovis migration had been Chinese. They had brought with them the Chinese love of squareness and frontality. Now, four generations later, Viridian household furniture still showed their influence in its stolidity as well as its nomenclature.) He had got up from the k'ang politely when Bonnar came in.

Leaf had introduced them. Bonnar, already jealous, had seen a small, light-skinned, sandy-haired man, very well dressed. Horvendile, in fact, had been so well-dressed as to deserve the adjective "nett," and he was wearing the dark reddish-brown jacket that anybody who was "nett" was wearing now. Bonnar had been unpleasantly conscious that his own costume had come from main depot and was standard Upper wear.

Horvendile, it seemed, taught history at Shalom University. There was a scattering of conversation, and then an awkward pause. "Why don't you get us something to eat, Leaf?" Horvendile had said.

Oh, quite the airs of the master of the house! Bonnar, thinking about it now, felt the blood rise in his cheeks. And Leaf had risen and gone out for food obediently.

Left alone, the two men had not even tried to talk. Bonnar had stared at the other, knowing he was being rude, and not caring. Horvendile had kept looking up at the ceiling, a faint smile on his lips. "I'll see what's keeping Leaf," he had said finally, and gone out to the pantry after her.

The little vulgarian! He had the manners of a Body-

servant, a Lower, a . . . Could it possibly be? No, nobody would be allowed to teach history without a thorough search having been made into his pedigree. Horvendile was as much an Upper as Bonnar himself. And yet there was something odd about Horvendile, something very odd indeed. Was he sorry for the Lowers? Sometimes you met Uppers who were. Bonnar had resolved to find out all he could about Horvendile.

The moments had passed. There was no sound from the food pantry. At last Bonnar, knowing he was behaving inexcusably, had risen and tiptoed toward the pantry. He had opened the door very, very softly, and looked in. He had found Leaf in Horvendile's arms.

Or rather, Horvendile had one arm around her and was caressing her with the other hand. His air was easy; he had caressed her before, he would do it again. And Leaf leaned away from him, her eyes shut, her breath deep-drawn. Her face wore the look, the excited, beautiful look that Bonnar had seen on it so many times. It had taken all of Bonnar's self-command for him to tiptoe back to the maskart room and sit down quietly again.

Ever since, he had tried to tell himself that he had imagined it.

Leaf had come in with the tray of food at last, Horvendile tagging behind her. Bonnar had tried to chew a biscuit, sip some vermotka. It hadn't been a pleasant call. But Bonnar had remembered his instructions. Before he left, he had asked Leaf to have dinner with him some night. She'd said she was busy, had refused.

Two days later he had received a form to fill out, a "report of progress" form.

What progress had he to report? The day after his visit he'd called Leaf and asked her to dinner—for a date, any-

thing—again. This time her refusal hadn't been so positive. It was possible that in time he'd be able to get back on the old footing with her. If he didn't think he could, it was his duty to say so on the report.

And then they—the people who had told him to resume the acquaintance of Miss Leaf Amadeus—would send somebody else.

How could he know what progress he was making? His mind was shaken profoundly. Jealousy and desire and hate and rage were buffeting him. It was in an effort to resolve the chaos of emotion that he had gone down Stairs; and he had come back more desperate with conflict than ever. His impulse was to fill out the report with a glowing account of progress made, with an even more glowing account of progress for which he hoped. But how could he be sure what his motive was?

If only he had something to set beside his jealousy of Leaf, something creative and real that belonged to him, he thought he could fill out the report more objectively.

For a moment he felt a spark of rebelliousness. Why should he be so concerned for objectivity? He had obeyed once, when he had broken off his relationship with Leaf; and if the results of that obedience hadn't been quite what "they" would have liked, it was none of his affair. Let them pull their own chestnuts out of the fire. Then the habits of a lifetime reasserted themselves, and he was ashamed. Discipline was the basis of Viridian society. And discipline, in the end, served one's own interests best.

Bonnar had been walking along slowly since he left the decontamination booth. The sun had set; outside, the night would be as bright as moonlight from the ionizing layer in the air, but under the dome there was the good yellow

glare of sodium vapor street lamps. Suddenly he thought of Candia.

Candia. For the first time in two days, his face really relaxed. It was not, in a sense, very dignified. But if he wanted something creative, something that belonged to him, Candia might be the answer. He rather liked her. And her suggestion was not without its flattery.

Candia was a woman of a type that was neither rare nor common on Viridis. Women like her were recognized, tolerated, and even modestly honored. Candia was a woman (Upper, of course) who loved child-bearing.

Bonnar had never been quite sure how many children Candia had had. He'd asked her about it once, and she had laughed and evaded him. But from various casual references in her conversation, he thought it must be seven or eight. It was odd to think about, since she wasn't much over Leaf's age (better keep his mind off *that*), and seemed young and fresh.

Would her invitation—suggestion—still be open? It was a week or so since she had suggested, over glasses of anthelia at a party, that he might give her her next child. She had added parenthetically that it was nearly eight weeks since her last delivery. Bonnar had been too startled to do much except stutter in reply.

He couldn't phone her. The phone service in Shalom was out of order, as usual. The grapevine had it there had been some Lower sabotage. And he didn't want to drop in on Candia uninvited. She might have company.

In the end, Bonnar hailed a Body-servant who was going by in the street, and gave him a message to take to Candia. He was just across the street from Tandis Park. Unfortunately, there was no mask display scheduled there for tonight. But

he showed the Body-servant where he would wait for him.

Bonnar sat down and tried to interest himself in the crowd. Upper women, coiffed, furred, perfumed, walked with their free arrogant stride. Upper men, equally lordly, but with the air of tension that Upper male responsibility put on men. Two women, Body-servants, walking hand in hand. Was that getting more common? Bonnar didn't like it. A little Lower girl, trying to hide behind the Upper who was holding her by the arm. Her eyes were round with wonder, but she was acutely aware of her rags. Two very young Uppers, boys really, who stared after her. A dazzlingly beautiful Upper woman; Bonnar thought she must have made herself so beautiful because she was beginning to fight the fear of age. More Body-servants.

Overhead there was a long, sliding rustle. It was repeated. Bonnar realized with a sick disgust at the pit of his stomach that he had seated himself on a bench underneath one of the writhing trees.

He couldn't move; the Body-servant with the message wouldn't know where to find him. But this was a bad omen for the beginning of something he hoped would help him overcome his jealousy of Leaf.

At last the man came back with the message. He hadn't been gone long, actually. A Body-servant with a message usually could be trusted to run all the way. It was the writhing trees that had made his absence seem so long.

Bonnar dismissed the man with a nod and a buffet, and tore open the envelope. "Dear Bonnar," he read in Candia's big, slashing handwriting. "No, it's not quite too late. You know I always did like you. Come along! Candia."

Bonnar's smile changed into a grin. Um, yes. It was going to be all right.

Candia had a big apartment. She was getting a government bonus, which would help. As the Body-servant let Bonnar into the foyer, he heard a babble of soft, childish voices from the rooms within. Then a door seemed to close.

"Miss Dee says for you to wait," the servant told him. "She'll be right down."

Down? Oh, yes. There was a balcony at one end of the foyer. Candia must be dressing up there.

Bonnar looked around him. He stood in a big, high-ceilinged room with black woodwork and white walls. The ceiling was Chinese red. The room was big enough to be wonderfully suited to maskart, but from the way the chairs were placed, it probably never was used for that.

He sat down on the k'ang. It was admirably thick-matted and deep. Around the room were scattered evidences of childish occupation—a striped ball, a stuffed green and lavender *felodon,* a *Young People's History of the Jovis Migration.* On the back of a chair was a tiny knitted jacket that must belong to the latest arrival in Candia's nursery.

All very domestic. Nothing could have been more maternal, more admirable. But Bonnar found that this male-less interior, this almost parthenogenetic emphasis on mother and child, oppressed him. He got up and began to pace around the room restlessly, picking up objects, examining them, and putting them down again. A picture over the big rosewood and brass secretary in the corner caught his eye. He went over to it.

It was a large picture, one of the depth stereos that had become popular lately. Bonnar looked at it for a moment uncomprehendingly. Then he began to laugh.

It was Candia, of course—the round, rather vapid face and the blonde hair were unmistakable—Candia and her children. And what a lot of them there were! One, two, three,

four, five, on up to nine, if you counted the baby Candia was carrying. And the baby looked rather older than seven weeks, so the picture must have been taken last year. By now Candia's score would be ten.

Nine children when the picture was taken, and all of them different. Some blonde, some brunette, some with oriental eyes, one with red hair. All different, and all strikingly good-looking. He ought to be flattered—well, in a sense he was—at Candia's interest in him.

Still chuckling, Bonnar moved away from the stereo. It occured to him that he was feeling much better. Leaf—he just didn't have to think about Leaf any more.

Half-hidden at the edge of the litter of papers on the big secretary desk, a singularly vivid triangle of orange paptex glowed up at him. Bonnar looked at it, frowning a little. Where had he seen paptex of that intense orange before? It looked official; it reminded him of something unpleasant.

It wasn't any of his business. Candia's papers were her own affair.

Then he remembered. It had been at a party. The quota was one of the things people didn't talk about—one of the painful, hateful necessities that life on Viridis, where the supply of non-polluted food was so limited, forced on society. But the woman he had been talking to held a high position in the Bureau of Demography, and she had enough to drink that her ordinary good manners were relaxed. He had expressed interest in quota mechanisms. She had pulled an orange out-quota notice from her hand-pouf and showed it to him.

If the piece of orange paptex on Candia's desk was an out-quota notice, it was very much his affair.

He ought to wait until Candia came down, and then ask

her about it. But . . . Bonnar drew the sheet from under the pile and looked at it.

The message was couched in the usual official verbiage, but the meaning was clear enough. The Bureau of Demography regretfully informed Miss Candia Dee, that any children or child, born to her between (a date two weeks in the past) and (a date over a year in the future) would be held out-quota. A separation would be regretfully enforced two months after the birth of said children or child and . . . consequences.

The consequences were enumerated in small type below.

So. Even when Candia had made her suggestion at the party, she'd known.

There was a step on the balcony overhead. Bonnar turned, still holding the out-quota notice in his hand.

There was a wave of perfume, flower-like, very sweet, and Candia started down the stairs toward him.

For a moment Bonnar forgot everything. Candia knew her limitations; she had made no attempt to present herself as more than she was. Her hair was combed, her face was lightly made up. That was all. But from shoulder to waist she was naked; she was wearing a gown of jet black fabric whose high collar and long sleeves made more deliberate its astonishing decolletage. Against the intense blackness of the material her nakedness had a hieratic, ritualistic quality. Her skin was dazzlingly white. And despite her multiple pregnancies—perhaps because of them—the outlines of her body were astonishingly virginal.

She came toward him, her hands outstretched, welcome in her voice. "Bonnar! I'm so glad." Then her eyes fell upon the sheet of paptex in his hand. "Oh. . . ." she said.

Bonnar thought, does it make any difference? This is Candia's affair. He could put the out-quota notice down on

the desk and forget about it, take her hands and sit down beside her on the k'ang. Candia wouldn't mention the notice unless he did. But he couldn't get it out of his mind.

No, it wouldn't work. What he had wanted from Candia hadn't been a short-lived physical relief. That wasn't too hard to come by though he liked Candia well enough. But he had thought that fatherhood would have been something to set beside his jealousy of Miss Leaf Amadeus, meaningful enough to have counterbalanced it. There wasn't much satisfaction in being the father of an out-quota child.

Candia was looking at him. "What's the matter?" she said at last. "Are you going to let that bother you?" She hadn't a particularly attractive voice.

"Doesn't it bother you?" After a pause he went on, "You love children, Candia. But do you want a child of yours to be reared as a Body-servant? Or, more likely, to have to go down the Stairs? Lowers don't live very long. And they don't like their lives."

She made a gesture. Her face twisted up. "I've thought about it so much," she said. "But I love babies. And it's more than a year, Bonnar, it's such a long time.

"How can I wait that long? You don't know what it's like to have a baby, Bonnar, it's a kind of direct creation, it's wonderful. A man can't imagine how it feels. And giving birth's the most wonderful of all. It's such a triumph! When you hear the baby's first cry. . . .

"Maybe they'd let my baby be a Body-servant. I hope they would. But I'd get to have it for the first two months, anyhow. I'd get to nurse it for the first two months."

She seemed to have finished speaking. She was looking away from Bonnar and down at the floor.

There was a silence. At last Bonnar said, "No. Not my child."

He started past her toward the door. Candia shivered. "You—you're going?" she said. Her voice was a little high. "You won't even sit down by me on the k'ang? We could discuss it, Bonnar. Maybe you'd decide. . . ."

"I'm sorry, Candia."

"Go on, then," she said. She tried to sneer. It was not a very good sneer, for Candia's face was more used to making the gentle expressions of maternity, but she managed it. "Go on. If you're not man enough—well, there are other men."

"Get one of them, then," Bonnar said. He went out. The Body-servant looked at him with a surprised face as she met him in the front hall.

Bonnar lived in a small flat not far from his office. He went home, went to bed. He had taken a sleeping pill. He couldn't get to sleep.

At last, about two in the morning, he got up and dressed. The report of progress he was supposed to fill out was still lying on the table where he had put it down when he had opened it. He looked at it without picking it up. Then he locked the door of his flat behind him and went out into the street.

It was so late that the yellow sodium vapor street lights had been shut off. The moon-bright radiance of Viridian night shone unimpeded through the fabric of the dome. The streets looked clean and flat and wide in the unfamiliar bleached white light.

He began to walk. Several times he was stopped by peace officers, but he was unmistakably Upper. Only one of them made him show his laissez-passer.

He walked for hours. Shalom, in the penetrating white glow was oddly different from its daylight self. More than

once he had to look at the street name imbedded in the curb before he knew where he was.

At last he looked at his watch; it was a little after four; in not very much longer it would be dawn. The streets of Viridis would be green again. He might as well go home. He was so tired that he thought he could sleep for a few hours.

Where had he got to? He was on the edge of the city, near—oh, yes, of course. His mouth twisted as he tried to laugh. His legs had taken him, without conscious direction, very close to where Leaf lived.

Why not? Why shouldn't he look. He wanted to. And then he'd go home.

Leaf's apartment was on the second floor of a block of flats. To his surprise—it was well after four by now—a dim light shone through the thin matting that covered the windows. It looked as if there were a light, not in the maskart room itself, which was on the front, but in one of the rooms behind.

He stood watching. He didn't know what he was waiting for. The light grew brighter, as if a door had been opened. A shadow seemed to approach the window blind.

It was Leaf. The shadow was blurred, but he would have recognized it anywhere. She seemed to be hurrying into the maskart room.

Another shadow followed her. This one was unmistakable too. Damn him, damn him. Horvendile.

They seemed to argue. Once Leaf put out her hand toward the other shadow as if to push it away. She shook her head. But shadow Horvendile was persistent. He put his arm around her shoulders. She resisted a moment and then let him draw her up to him.

The embrace grew closer. Horvendile's face bent to Leaf's.

She put her arms around his neck. There was a long, deep kiss. When it ended, Horvendile, his arm still around Leaf, drew her gently from the maskart room.

Still interlaced, the shadows retreated. The light grew dim again, as if a door had closed. After a moment the light went out.

Bonnar was shaking with rage. It didn't occur to him that the scene he had witnessed could have any interpretation other than the obvious one. For a moment he thought of breaking the door down, killing Horvendile, raping Leaf. Then reason asserted itself. He turned and began the long walk home.

It was broad green day when he let himself into his flat. He went straight to the table beside the k'ang, picked up the progress report, dipped a brush in ink, and began filling in the report.

When he had finished writing, he read his work. What he had put down on the report wasn't quite true. *Quite* true? Most of it wasn't true at all. But it *would* be true; he'd see to that.

He yawned. He undressed and got into bed. He was asleep almost at once. He wouldn't have believed it if somebody had told him that the report he had just filled out would change the course of Viridian history.

Chapter 3

"WE WERE civil to each other when we were outside," Bonnar said. "I suppose it was because we were both so badly confused. . . ."

"Jansen's work," Horvendile said. He indicated the suburban street which, lined on both sides with elegant "advanced" houses, began abruptly and without preamble in the middle of the heavy jungle undergrowth, ran for some fifteen hundred feet as straight as the marks of a ruler, and came to an end again as abruptly and unreasonably as it had begun. There was not a single weed in the pavement of the street, not a blade of grass in the houses' neat concrete yards; but over the tops of the buildings the tall trees of the rain forest had closed in to make an almost solid roof.

"Jansen the First, Contractor of Viridis," Horvendile continued, smiling. "The man's energy was enormous. There are streets like this all over Viridis, sometimes even whole villages, except in the very worst radioactive areas. Sometimes the glass in the windows is cracked, but the houses themselves are made of permastone, and they're nearly as fresh as they were when they were built two hundred years ago. I don't suppose three percent of them have ever been lived in, but they're complete down to the tiling in the kitchens and the perfume showers in the bath.

"Why? You seem surprised, Bonnar. Haven't you ever been outside before? Jansen's in all the history books."

Bonnar considered. "I'd read about it," he said at last.

"But I don't suppose I realized how it was. What was he trying to do, anyhow?"

"Jansen? Oh, build an empire. What he'd have called an empire, I mean—really, a planetary government with himself at the head. He thought the best way of getting followers would be to offer them beautiful free housing. He loved to build. And he was a very rich man."

Bonnar was still thinking. "I don't see how they could have made a mistake like that," he said slowly.

"Like thinking the unprotected surface was habitable? It is odd. But you see, their instruments for measuring radioactivity were defective. Nobody knows just how it happened; some historians think there was deliberate sabotage on the part of Jansen's political opponents.

"At any rate, their instruments were defective. People lived in the houses—some of the houses—for about six months before they realized that anything was wrong. There was a good deal of anxiety, probably from an unconscious realization of bodily damage occuring, and some of the settlers had lowgrade fevers and skin rashes, but Jansen had a dominating personality, and he persuaded them to ignore it. They thought it was just fungus. Then the big bad lesions broke out. People started dying. They recalibrated their instruments in a hurry after that."

Horvendile had made this explanation with his usual air of faint mockery. It was as if he never quite believed in anything he said. This time Bonnar was not much bothered by it. "Is that why the law about recalibration was passed?" he asked.

"The law that all instruments to measure radioactivity must be calibrated against those already in use on Viridis before they can be introduced into the planet? Yes. They were afraid of further sabotage, you see."

Horvendile halted. Through the leaded glass of his helmet Bonnar could see his sandy eyebrows raised. Then he got up from the hillock where he had been sitting and made a sketchy, half-formal, half-humorous bow. "Hello, Leaf."

The girl moved along the street toward them. In the strange, sub-aqueous light that filtered down through the long leaves of the Lepidodendrons and calamites to lie in stripes of lime green and ashy gray on Jansen's pavement, she seemed not so much to walk as to drift, as if she pressed her way through a medium denser and more resistant than air.

She was, as always, graceful. Even in the heavy protective suit of lead-coated fabric she moved well. But as she got nearer Bonnar saw, through the glass of her helmet, that her face still wore the dreaming, remote, self-centered look that so irritated and frightened him. He glanced toward Horvendile. The historian was looking down, frowning. He seemed to dislike the expression Leaf had been wearing as much as Bonnar did.

"Hello, my dear," Bonnar said when she had got up to them. "You were gone a long time. Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No." She raised her hands toward her helmet, as if she would have liked to press her head. "I don't think it's here. We'll hunt further on tomorrow. But look." Leaf's expression lost its dreamlike quality and became animated; Bonnar watched the change with a pleasure that was tinged with jealousy, since it was Horvendile she was speaking to. "It's getting dark. Let's hunt through the houses and decide which one we want to sleep in. That would be fun." She smiled at the historian.

Bonnar bit his lip. He was afraid that Leaf or Horvendile would glance toward him and see that he was flushing. Oh,

the shameless, shameless—Then common sense came to his rescue. They were all wearing the heavy protective lead suits. They all knew the danger. It was unsafe, really, to eat or eliminate. As far as anything else went, Leaf and Horvendile might as well be wearing reciprocal belts of chastity.

He glanced toward the sky. The foliage was too dense for him to see the sun, but the light did seem to be dimmer. Horvendile was nodding agreement with Leaf's plan. They started along the street, laughing and talking. He followed them.

Now that he had no longer the distraction of Horvendile's disquisition on Jansen, his worries returned to him. He was in a spot, all right. A bad spot. No doubt of it.

There were, in the first place, his reports about Leaf. After he had sent in the initial one, he had received a long questionaire to fill out. There had been over a hundred questions, ranging from Leaf's current sleeping habits to what she said about the activities in the Apple Pickers, and he would have been able to answer only twenty or so of them with the confidence of real knowledge. A confession of ignorance would have been dangerous; it would have meant that in his first report he had lied. So he had filled in the answers at random, sweating with anxiety.

Time had passed; he had begun to hope that his answers had been right, or at least plausible. (If only he had been able to see some trend behind the questions! Then he would have known what answers to give. But he couldn't make out what they were driving at.) Yes, he had begun to hope that he had gotten away with it. But two days ago he had received a slip requesting him to report for a clarifying examination in connection with the questionaire.

Oh, he was in a spot. He had heard stories about what

"clarification" could amount to. He woke up in the night thinking about it, feeling sick.

That in itself had been bad enough. But there had been trouble with the new mask.

It hadn't been a bad mask, really. He and a couple of his assistants had worked hard on it. It had stressed the similarity of the Lowers' dim, green-lit world below Stairs and a romantically hostile jungle, and had inculcated with reasonable subtlety the need for patience, courage, and self-sacrifice in dealing with both. But a man named Kramner had been killed last week by Lowers and one of the Lowers had said that Kramner was an evil jungle animal that deserved to be killed. He had cited phrases from the current mask in proof. Would they hold Bonnar responsible?

Rumor had it that Kramner was an important Upper, perhaps even one of the Eleven, who spent a lot of time below Stairs.

For a moment phrases and fears shifted kaleidoscopically in Bonnar's mind. High treason . . . The person of an Upper shall be secure . . . social stability. . . . The Eleven is *actually* the government . . . does Miss Leaf Amadeus wear much metal jewelry? Then his thoughts settled into immobility, a conviction that ran: I'm in a bad spot. I can think of only one way to get out of it.

Horvendile and Leaf had paused in front of one of the houses. From a long way off there was a hollow reverberating crash; somewhere deeper within the rain forest a tree had fallen. But Leaf and her companion were too absorbed in each other to turn.

Bonnar looked at them unseeingly, for once not jealous. This trip with Leaf represented—it was the only way he could think of it—his last hope. If he could find out what the government wanted from her, why she was important,

he might be able to get through the clarifying examination safely. But if he could discover what Leaf herself was hunting, it might be—it *must* be, he was in such a bad spot—it might be a piece of information so important that he could bargain against Kramner's death with it.

But what little luck he'd had so far! The day before yesterday Leaf had come to him and asked him to help her and Horvendile get a laissez-sorter from Shalom. He'd been overjoyed at the chance to get back in contact with her. He'd told her certainly, yes, he'd get the pass for her, but he was afraid he would have to go along too. Security reasons. And she'd accepted his presence on the trip gracefully enough.

So far, so good. He'd even succeeded in getting a 'copter out on loan from the two that were assigned to Verbal, and he'd piloted. But as soon as he had set the ship down in a clear spot near where she told him, she had seemed to draw away from him. He had tried to accompany her when she had gone walking off into the forest; she had turned on him and told him to go away, he prevented her from thinking. And to every overture of his since then she had responded with blankness or an actual warding off.

"It might be fun to sleep in this one," Leaf was saying. I like the color of the roof, that luminous blue-green, and the pink plaster—I know it's not plaster, but it looks like that—has been put on so heavily, in those long curving lines, that the house looks like it had been covered with some sort of long-haired fur. Don't you think it would be fun to sleep in a pink fur house, Horvendile?"

"Un-hunh," the historian answered. He was looking at her with a faint grin, but his eyebrows were still folded in a frown.

"But what's that thing in the yard behind it?" She pointed.

"It doesn't seem to be made of the same material as the house. It looks like an afterthought."

"The beehive-like thing?" Horvendile answered. "Yes, it was an afterthought. When the settlers found out that living in the open country was dangerous, some of them still wanted to stay. They built shelters, hoping that if they spent part of the time in them, it might be safe to live in the houses the rest of the time. Would you like to look at the shelter, Leaf?"

"Yes, I would."

They started around the house toward the shelter. Bonnar followed them.

The shelter was a crude elongated dome about seven feet across and six feet high. It had been painted a leaden gray on the outside. It couldn't have held more than one person in comfort, and two people would have been its absolute capacity. There was no window anywhere in it.

"Do you want to look inside?" Horvendile asked when the three were standing around the shelter. "If it's like most of the hastily-built shelters, the door rolls up like those old desks we saw in the museum."

"Yes, I'd like to see inside."

Horvendile fumbled along the ground and pressed. After a moment, a section of the side of the shelter slid up. They peered within.

"I can't see anything," Leaf said. "It's got too dark. Turn on your torch, Horvendile."

He obeyed. The interior of the shelter leaped into visibility. Leaf gave a cry.

"Oh, a man! A skeleton."

"I'm sorry, Leaf," Horvendile answered. He had already switched off the torch. From the tone of his voice, he was

disturbed. "I didn't know there would be anybody inside."

"No, of course not. How do you suppose he died?"

In the dusk, Bonnar could barely make out that Horvendile shrugged. "Might have been radiation exposure. He might have been already sick when he went to the shelter. Maybe he got a bad case of fungus; people have died from it. Or if the others went away and left him, he might have starved."

"Or he might even have killed himself," Leaf said with an attempt at composure. She seemed to raise her hands to her head. "I can still see the bones," she said in a flat, uninflected voice. "Like a tree of white needles coming out from the spine. Horvendile, I know what happened to him."

"Oh? What was that?"

"He broke his leg after the others left him, and he couldn't get to his food. He was afraid of radiation poisoning—that's why he was in the shelter—but it wasn't that that killed him. He starved to death."

Horvendile was silent for an instant. Then he flicked the beam of his torch on her face. Bonnar saw that she was very white. "How do you know?" Horvendile asked.

"He told me."

Horvendile gave a faint, soft whistle. It was almost dark under the trees, but the nightly band of moon-like radiance was spreading over the sky. None of them moved for a moment, though Bonnar found that he was shivering within his protective suit. Then Horvendile said, "Well—we'd better find another house where we can sleep."

Leaf seemed to have lost all interest in the houses. She stood by passively while Horvendile settled on a big, rambling building with boldly tesselated walls, followed him docilely along the path to it, and stepped inside with her maddening somnambulistic air when he had managed to get the door open. It was not until their three sleeping-bags had

been laid out around the walls of the central hall—well separated from each other, Bonnar saw with relief—that she recovered any of her vivacity.

"This house seems absolutely virginal," she said, sweeping the cornice and walls with the beam from her torch. "I suppose the checkerboard designs were too much for any of Jansen's followers. But why don't the lights come on, Horvendile?"

"After two hundred years?" the historian answered. "It's wonderful that the houses are as well preserved as they are. Besides, Jansen didn't realize that there are enough radioactive metals at almost any spot at all on Viridis to furnish power. (You remember what I was telling you, Bonnar.) As far as that goes, we don't use radioactives very much for power even in Shalom. Jansen depended on solar energy."

"And I suppose the mirrors are br—Oh! What was that?"

"That" had been a shock that had sent Leaf almost to her knees. She clutched wildly at the wall to recover herself. The whole room shook and tilted.

"Earthquake!" Horvendile exclaimed. He pulled Leaf and Bonnar under the door jamb. "Safest place," he said in explanation. "House is well built, though. Don't be scared." The room shook again. From somewhere deep below there was a long, grinding roar. Then the house settled back into silence and stability.

"That's probably all for tonight," Horvendile said after a moment. "Leaf, are you all right?"

"Yes.. I—I expect I'm just hungry. For a minute I thought I saw something step down. . . . Never mind. It's been a long time since lunch. Let's have some nutrisoup."

For three minutes or so there was a silence broken only by the sounds of rapid swallowing. They were all trying

to make the period of exposure as short as possible. Then Leaf closed her helmet and got to her feet.

"I'll be back," she said.

"The plumbing doesn't work either, my dear," Horvendile said lazily.

When she was gone, Bonnar's anxiety was suddenly too much for him to contain in silence. "Horvendile—" he said.

"Yes?" The smaller man leaned toward him. In the light of the two torches his face was the face of an ally.

"Horvendile, what's Leaf hunting anyhow?"

The other man shook his head. "I don't know. I just don't know. When I try to find out, she either won't answer or gets angry. I didn't think she'd be like that with me."

The last words sent a muted pang of jealousy through Bonnar. "No, I don't know what she's hunting," Horvendile continued. "I feel that it isn't, umh, quite what she'll be hunting later. And I suppose she isn't sure what she's looking for herself."

He began picking up the empty nutrisoup cartons and straws. He tossed them into the big black-tiled fireplace and set fire to them. "Botanist I know was out in the field with a party last year," he said in explanation, "collecting specimens. He said they didn't have any trouble at all with carnivores, even with Felodons, unless they left nutrisoup cartons lying around. Then not only the carnivora jumped them, but even some of the little egg-layers. I guess nutrisoup smells better to them than it does to us."

The cartons burned with a waxy crackling. The chimney must have been almost clear; very little smoke came out in the room. There was a plop and then another one as two night-flying moths, attracted by the sudden light, hurled themselves against the permapane. Leaf reentered the room.

"Bonnar," she said without preamble, "do you think you

could put the 'copter down about two miles from here, pretty nearly southeast, tomorrow?"

"Sure. I mean, I'd be glad to."

"Thank you. And now, let's go to bed. I think we must all be tired."

Bonnar had trouble getting to sleep. His protective suit was a miserably uncomfortable thing to sleep in, and his personal difficulties, the spot he was in, weighed on his mind. About midnight it began to rain. The sound, at first, seemed an added vexation, but as the noise increased to a steady drumming roar, he found it soothing. He slept deeply for four or five hours.

Next day was rainy also. He put the 'copter down where Leaf told him, and he and Horvendile watched her from the shelter of the cabin as she moved about slowly in the grayish haze of rain. He and the historian found little to say to each other.

Toward noon it cleared. They had their nutrisoup in the open. Suddenly Leaf, who had been sucking away on her straw like the others, pushed the carton from her. It fell on the ground and rolled over. Pinkish liquid began to spill out.

"It's here," she said in a high voice. "Here."

"What's here?" Horvendile demanded. He got to his feet and stood facing her, nearly as excited as she was. "What's here? What are you talking about?"

"The—what I was hunting for. What I *thought* I was hunting for. The thing."

"Where is it? What's it like?"

"It's a—a long way down." She pointed to the ground. "Hundreds and hundreds of feet. The quake last night changed the level. It's under layers of lava. But it's here."

Horvendile was biting his lips. He seemed exasperated enough to be grinding his teeth. "*What's* there?" he de-

manded. "What are you talking about? Leaf, for God's sake!"

"I'm trying to tell you," Leaf answered reasonably. She put one hand up, as if she would have pushed a strand of her dark red hair away from her face. "I don't know what the name of it is," she continued. "It's about four feet long, a sort of gold color. Not gold, really—more coppery. It's shaped like a spindle, only shorter and more thick."

"And that's what you've been looking for all the time? A spindle-shaped thing made of gold?"

"Yes. I mean no—it's what I *thought* I was hunting. The real thing I've been looking for is—I don't know how to express it—more big. That's why I haven't been able to find it. It's like the biggest letters on a map. You overlook them just because of their size. This gold thing wasn't hard. I don't know why it took me so long to pick it up."

"But you can see this gold thing, down through the rocks?"

"Yes."

"And you don't know what it is? What it was used for?"

"No. I get an impression of fire from it. It's empty now."

Both the men were staring at Leaf. She lowered her eyes to the ground, where the pink puddle of nutrisoup was spreading out. For a moment there was silence. Then from the brush behind them came a single deep resounding note.

All three spun round. Bonnar and Horvendile knew what the belched-out sound meant; Leaf must have surmised. The Felodon—an outsize, even for Felodons—was coming toward them in a series of graceful, easy, exceedingly fast leaps.

It stopped on the edge of the brush. It put its head up and gave a scream like a demented woman's. Then it crouched, ready for the last of its leaps.

Now, a stuffed cloth Felodon makes an attractive nursery toy. Its coloring—lavender and green—is pretty, the thick

plush in which a toy is covered is pleasant to handle and pet. Even the creature's ferocious fangs, which are so dirty that the slightest scratch from them is dangerous, become amusing in a toy. But a Felodon in the flesh is a very different matter. The funniness evaporates; the belching hunting cry becomes as unamusing as a lion's roar. The creature's graceful body and pretty fur only enhance the impression of malignity. An angry Felodon seems to incarnate malevolence and hate.

Leaf, as well as the two men, was armed. With three guns, they were bound to kill the Felodon in time. But a Felodon, besides the walnut-sized brain inside its narrow skull, has a secondary brain in its rump, and an auxiliary nerve center under each kidney. A Felodon is apt to be exceedingly hard to kill.

Bonnar had been assessing the situation. They were too far from the 'copter to make a run for it; there were no trees near that they could climb. (The Felodon, despite its savage claws, is unable to get any further off the ground than it can jump.) It looked like they were in for it.

Horvendile thrust Leaf behind him. "Run," he ordered harshly. "Run, get in the 'copter. We'll hold him off."

Leaf put out her hand and pushed his gun aside. "It's all right," she said. "I'll send him away." Before Horvendile could stop her, she was walking steadily out toward the Felodon.

Her movement seemed to trigger the big animal's nervous instability. It did not even give its usual short warning scream. There was a twitch along the fur of the lavender flank. It leapt.

Bonnar was too amazed to feel horror, to feel any emotion at all. Mouth open, eyes wide, he waited for Leaf to buckle and roll under the impact.

The Felodon's long leap seemed to corrode in mid-air. For a moment it hung motionless, like a green and purple Nijinsky. Then it dropped, rolled over, and collapsed in a wildly waving tangle of tail and claws a little in front of Leaf's feet.

Leaf bent forward a little. The Felodon stopped moving. It seemed to have turned to stone. Leaf put one hand out over the green plush head. She made a lifting motion. Clumsily and almost reluctantly the Felodon got to its feet.

It spat at her. Hatred and frustration and helplessness made its nasty little eyes almost incandescent. Once more it spat at her. Then it screamed very briefly and trotted off into the brush.

Bonnar realized that he was panting. He looked at Horvendile. The smaller man was very pale, and his forehead was wet.

"That was almost a miracle, wasn't it?" the historian said. He managed to laugh. "Leaf—Leaf—it was worthy of the Green Queen herself!"

Bonnar stood very still. At Horvendile's words something had clicked inside his brain. There was much that was still unclear to him; sudden insight warred with blank incomprehension. What Leaf herself was hunting, what had happened to her, what Horvendile's role was—he could form no idea of these things.

But the enlightenment that had come to him was absolute. It was not reasonable, but he knew that it was true. The Green Queen was a character in a mask he had made. She had never existed, and the mask itself was becoming a nuisance. Yet someone, perhaps the government, perhaps someone high in the government, wanted Leaf to assume the role of the Queen.

That was why she had been propelled into the Apple

Pickers, why Bonnar himself (and perhaps others?) had been set to pull and prod her into behaving as was wished. She was to be a puppet, a figurehead, very far indeed from a real queen.

Such a proceedure was dangerous. The danger to be avoided by it must be great.

Could Bonnar use his new knowledge to save himself? Perhaps; and now that he knew this much, he might be able to learn more. Oh, yes. There were all sorts of possibilities.

Horvendile had gone over to Leaf. He put his arm around her and drew her to him. Bonnar looked at them unseeingly. He had begun to smile.

Section Two: The Myth

Chapter 4

"SO WE set up an anti-Leaf," Bonnar said. "There was a place, a node, in my original verbal mask where the development could be attached. . . ."

"The Green Queen is supposed to have certain traditional powers," Bonnar expained wearily. "She has clairaudience and clairvoyance and cryptaesthesia, for example."

He paused, and glanced at the Auglinger. How was she taking all the big words? Yes, just as he'd expected, her jaw was dropped and she was looking at him blankly. Her expression was always blank; she had remarkably stupid eyes.

He sighed. "I mean," he glossed his own word choice, "that the Green Queen is supposed to be able to hear and see things happening at a distance, and to perceive the contents of closed containers and so on. Now, we can't do much in the way of simulating powers like those. But the Green Queen is also supposed to be able to kill with a gesture of the hand, to be able to revive and restore by a touch. We *can* approximate those gifts artificially.

"That's why it's so important for you to learn to man-

ipulate, and manipulate skillfully, the rods hidden under your clothes. Do you understand?"

The Auglinger looked at him doubtfully. After a moment she nodded, though even more doubtfully, her carroty head. "Yes. I guess."

"Good. Try it again. This time, the long spark."

Caroline Auglinger glanced at him nervously. With a good deal of wriggling she managed to get her plump white hand down inside the waist-high slits of her embroidered robe. More wriggling, a series of body-bumps. A moment of painful expectation, while she visibly felt along the row of controls in the front of her dress. Then, at long last, from her stiffly outstretched left hand, there shot out a feeble spark.

"You're using the wrong hand," Bonnar said patiently. "You must stretch out your *right* hand and work the controls with the left."

"Oh. I thought I *was* using my left."

Once more Caroline Auglinger, Green Queen, anti-Leaf, fumbled inside her robe. A nimbus appeared around her head and then flickered off again. There was another pause, long, painful, expectant. The Auglinger's milky skin grew flushed.

From the end of her extended right hand a long, blue spark shot out. It was a good, powerful-looking spark, quite the best she had yet produced. Bonnar wanted to applaud.

The spark hung in the air for a minute. Slowly it began to sag down, in a paling, disspirited arc. Before it could touch the floor or disappear entirely, it seemed to correct itself. It shot back up Caroline Auglinger's wrist.

The woman uttered a sharp, surprised cry. "Oh! Oh; I've stung myself!"

Bonnar felt no desire to laugh. This had happened a

number of times before; no doubt it would happen several times yet again. "Yes," he said. He put his hands over his eyes. "You'd better rest."

Caroline Auglinger relaxed. From the unnatural, ramroddy stiffness her body took on when she was trying to impersonate the queen, her normal slumped posture reappeared. She sat down in a chair with a thump. "Thank you," she said.

Bonnar took his hands down from his eyes and looked at her. Why did he dislike her so? She was reasonably young, not impossibly bad looking. And yet he continually felt an intensity of dislike that, from a male to a female, was surprising. The more he attempted to train her in her role, the more he resented her.

Partly, of course, it was because she simply wasn't Leaf. He found that he was unconsciously trying to make her behave as Leaf would have behaved. And when she showed herself recalcitrant and inept, his dislike of her increased.

But there was more to it than that. Would she do for the Green Queen at all? She had to; she was all they had. And they had trained her carefully. They had dieted her to make her lose weight, exercised her to make her less flabby. Experts had worked painstakingly on her diction, her bearing, her voice.

But no training could disguise the tawdriness of her spirit. It was incurable. It shone through every improvement that they imposed on her, and rendered the changes ludicrous. Whatever they did, she remained a silly, vapid woman, dressed up for a queen.

Would she do for the Queen? Perhaps. From a distance, with the light coming from an angle, with all the prestige of the government behind her—she might pass. And if she weren't too closely confronted with Leaf.

Suddenly, Bonnar felt that he couldn't stand any more of her. The situation was growing serious, reports that the Green Queen had shown herself down Stairs were increasing in number and detail with every hour. Time was valuable. But right now, for now, he couldn't stand any more Auglinger. He'd have to have a rest from her, if it was only for a couple of hours.

"We'll have a recess," he said to the woman. "I'll call the guards."

"Oh." Her doughy face lit up. The only animation she had ever shown, from the first moment she had been brought to the Tower, the government fort in the center of Shalom, had come at the times he was dismissing her. "That will be nice."

The only animation? No, that wasn't entirely true, not quite fair to the Auglinger. She *had* shown animation, interest, excitement even, when it came to embroidering the robes she was to wear as queen. And she had done a beautiful job. All that was best in Caroline Auglinger came out in her embroidering.

She had embroidered a fantasy, pure and lovely, in tender shades of spring-like green. Jade, emerald, nephrite, and a dozen tones between, had been in her needle's palette. Between the fantastic shades of green she had set touches of turquoise and robin's egg blue. And finally there were flowers of a strange flat pinky beige. The robes of a queen. Even on Caroline herself they looked well. How would they have looked on Leaf?

Bonnar sighed. He pressed the buzzer. To the guards, when they entered, he said, "Take this lady to her rooms."

Meditatively he watched the queen-candidate's broad back as it retreated down the corridor. The idea of Caroline's

robes had started a train of thought which it seemed somehow important to pursue. Her lack of animation, her interest in her embroidering. . . .

Oh, now he had it, the idea that had been eluding him. It was the difficulty they had had with Caroline—their failure, finally to make her believe that she was the Green Queen.

It had been decided, almost without argument, that she would give a better performance in her role if she were convinced that her role were true. The first visit to her narrow, crowded, ill-smelling Body-servants lodging had had the character of an Annunciation. The visitors—Bonnar had been among them—had bowed to her and addressed her deferentially. They had spoken to her in glowing terms of her future. And Caroline had looked at them slyly out of her doughy face with her flat eyes, and refused to believe.

They had tried hypnosis. For a moment Bonnar thought longingly of the psychological techniques of far-away earth. On earth, though it was legally forbidden, it was possible to make anyone believe anything. But Viridis was, as a Rockefeller man had once said, two hundred years behind the times, and a backwater to boot. Hypnosis was very nearly all they had.

When hypnosis had failed, they had tried direct suggestion, argument, and veridical maskart. It had all been futile. Less suggestible as well as less intelligent than Leaf, Caroline had remained stubbornly aware that her betters were using her for their own ends.

Why had the hypnosis failed? The hypnotist himself had said that what they had been trying to get Caroline to believe conflicted too deeply with her picture of herself. Caroline saw herself as pitiable, wronged, weak, abused.

(That she showed considerable aggressivness in marketing her sufferings did not change the pattern basically.) If she were the queen she would no longer be pitiable. So she could not believe that she was the queen.

But might there not be something else? An equally valid if less penetrating reason for her disbelief? Yes. Bonnar's lips tightened. The Auglinger might refuse to believe that *she* was the Green Queen—*if she thought the Green Queen was somebody else.*

Bonnar remained standing for a moment, thinking. Then he buzzed Intelligence and gave instructions. Their gist was that while Caroline Auglinger was to be allowed free egress from the Tower, all her actions and contacts were to be carefully watched.

He sat down at his desk. From the big range of windows in front of him he had a view high up over the capital's broad, tree-lined streets. He could see nearly the whole city. He was an important man in the government now, with a suite of rooms almost at the top of the Tower. His days in verbal mask seemed to be over. Sometimes he felt a little lonely for them.

His rise had come about easily, naturally, and it appeared in retrospect inevitably. At the "clarifying" interview he had used his surmises to answer the questions and to gather more information from what was asked. There had been other interviews with other more important persons. His old intimacy with Leaf had stood him in good stead; he had managed to parlay that, and what he had surmised and guessed up into an insight that must have seemed almost uncanny to his questioners. In the end, he had had a complete, even detailed, knowledge of what the government feared, of what it had attempted and why it had failed.

And when Leaf had disappeared, they had put him in charge of training anti-Leaf.

For a long time, he had learned, the tensions in Viridian social life had been increasing. Punitive measures against the Lowers were only temporarily effective; the sum total of Lower discontent always increased. (Discontent, not only with the precariousness of their lives, which one could understand, though not forgive, but also discontent with their own idleness and uselessness. *That,* as every Upper knew, was entirely the Lowers' own fault. They had a task in society to perform. They could perform it, if they only would.)

On the other hand, the number of Uppers—misguided, sentimental, or merely destructive—who wanted to make a basic change in Viridian society was increasing too. The government had reason to suspect that the cult of the Apple Pickers was a focus for people like these. It had seemed a brilliant, if possibly over-bold, idea to use the mask about the Green Queen that Bonnar had promulgated, to draw both groups—the rebellious Lowers and the reforming Uppers—out into the open where the government could sterilize the infection and deal with the dissidents radically. Yes, a brilliant idea. Bonnar had been impressed when he had learned about it. But it hadn't worked.

Leaf, of course, had been the heart of the plan. Green Queen, Mistress of Viridia in her own eyes, she was to have been in reality the government's puppet, or, more accurately, the government's judas sheep (What would have become of her, Bonnar wondered, if the plan *had* worked? Would she have been allowed to go on living after she had led her docile followers into the government's grasp?). But only at first had she played the part assigned to her.

She had joined the Apple Pickers in her emotional

reaction to Bonnar's breaking with her. She had passed the initiatory tests triumphantly and had become genuinely interested in the teachings of the cult. (They were egalitarian and mystic, Bonnar understood. Somewhere on the surface of Viridis, the Apple Pickers believed, there was a wonderful tree whose fruit, given to all to eat, would make human beings so free and wise and good that they would be like gods. Such a teaching could easily be brought into harmony with Bonnar's mask about the Green Queen and her golden tree of life.) But the next step no one had been able to get Leaf to take. Odic, the government's spy in the Apple Pickers, had never been able to acquire any influence over her.

Odic. Seated at his desk high above Shalom, Bonnar permitted himself a sour smile. What genius, high in the Council, had thought *Odic* could influence anyone? Odic was a typical KG, with the shambling gait, accusatory eyes, and unattractive personality KGs always seemed to have. To imagine him controlling Leaf was preposterous. But it was true that KGs were oddly apt to acquire influence over people who felt resentful. Their own intense resentment at having been KGs (cagees) seemed to act as a psychic bond with the others. Perhaps it had been assumed that Leaf would be feeling so resentful at Bonnar's desertion of her that Odic would be able to act on her.

Bonnar picked up the latest sheaf of reports and riffled through them. They all dealt with Leaf's appearances below Stairs, the usual miracles. Levitation, healing a Lower who was almost dead with the lesions, cryptaesthesia. One dealt with a government agent's attempt to assassinate. He had failed. The reports were detailed and clear, just as Bonnar had expected. He put them down again.

They brought up the question he never could answer quite satisfactoily: *was* Leaf really the Green Queen?

He himself had made up the mask about the queen.

The Green Queen was the mother of Viridis, the source of all Viridian life. She had gone away when her creatures had been disobedient. But when she saw how much her children were suffering in her absence, she would come again. She would lower the barrier, make the surface of the planet habitable, give all her offspring the fruit of the tree of life to eat. In the end, she would meet her divine consort beside the golden tree. The divine marriage would be consummated. And life on Viridis would be wonderful, a paradise, a dream. . . .

He had made up the mask about the Green Queen himself.

No, Leaf couldn't be the queen. But that meant that there must be somebody behind Leaf in the same way that he himself was behind Caroline. (Who had been behind Leaf when she had stopped the Felodon? Hm? He wasn't going to let himself think about that.)

Somebody behind Leaf would imply an organization, a well-organized conspiracy, with scientific resources equal to those of the government. And Intelligence had never found a trace of anything like that. But what alternative was there?

An individual, supporting Leaf, manipulating her? But the "miracles" would be quite beyond the scope of an individual. And even if they weren't, who could the individual be? Horvendile had disappeared; the reports on Leaf mentioned many followers with her, but the only one who seemed to be consistently present was Odic. Odic was a spy, a turncoat, a deserter. To imagine him as a cunning manipulator was ridiculous.

Could one of the big Foundations be supporting her? They were supposed never to intervene in domestic or planetary matters, but their studies, surveys and reports constituted in themselves a very considerable interference,

as most practical politicans realized. Was it possible that one of the Foundations was going further and fomenting a revolution directly?

Possible, but unlikely. Surely Intelligence would have discovered it.

Bonnar looked at his dial. There was a council meeting; he supposed he'd have to attend it. And then, more work with the Auglinger.

He was, at this moment, one of the most powerful men in the government. It was odd how little satisfactions the knowledge brought.

It was late when he got back from the meeting. He switched on the lights in his office and looked about him, sighing. The meeting had been confused, nervous, unconstructive. The head of the secret police had expressed doubt about the reliability of some of his men. If. . . .

There was a new bunch of reports on his desk. Bonnar picked them up.

He had not read four words of the first one before he was pressing a button. His brows were knitted in a furious frown. His mouth was grim. He had rarely been so angry.

When the Auglinger came he stood for a moment looking at her. Oh, the wide, soft body, the flat, doughy face! He began to talk.

"You couldn't offer to surrender to her freely, could you? To throw down the glove honestly. *That* would have been a matter of principle. No, you couldn't do that. You had to try to make money out of it."

Her fingers had gone to her mouth; she looked at him with scared, stupid eyes, and then away again.

"Such a little bit of money," Bonnar continued. "We heard most of your conversation, you know. The listener heard

something about your robe. Are you trying to sell them your robe?"

She winced. The shot had gone home. Had Caroline Auglinger really tried to include that too, in the deal she had wanted to make with the partisans of Leaf?

"Oh, I believe you would," Bonnar went on cruelly. "You'd sell your robe to the other queen, if you thought she'd pay for it. 'For sale, one robe, beautifully embroidered? Suitable for Green Queen?' Is that it? You'd sell your—"

A bell on Bonnar's desk rang clamorously. A red light had begun to flash. Hastily he jammed the phone to his ear.

After a few words his face grew dark. "Yes, yes," he said. "Certainly—Yes."

He hung up. For a second he stood with his hands clapsed together behind his back, his head lowered. "She's appeared above stairs," he said to nobody in particular.

The Auglinger gave a muffled gasp. Bonnar looked at her keenly. "You're to get dressed," he told her, "as quickly as possible, but carefully, in the queen's robes. Remember what I've tried to teach you. When you're dressed, the doctor will give you an injection of benz. Then you're to go to the Great Square.

"No, listen. I'm going with you. I'll have a receiver close behind your ear, and I'll tell you what to say and do. I'll also have a gun behind your back.

"Give a good performance, Mrs. Auglinger. Because if you give a bad one, I'll shoot you. I, or one of the men with me. We'll have nothing to lose by your death. Do you understand?"

Her face had gone pasty gray. She lowered her head. She would not meet his eyes. "Yes," she said.

They rode in a belocar to the edge of the square. Bonnar

had had a small shot of benz himself. It pleased him to find that he didn't especially need it. As they shot through the yellow-lit night he felt an emotion that was almost exhilaration. After so much waiting and suspense, such nervous, breath-held maneuvering, it was a relief to have the prospect of action at last. However this night ended, the issue would be resolved at last.

The Great Square had always been something of an anomaly in Shalom. Presumably it had been built because the designer of the capital city had felt that the captital was incomplete without a great open-air meeting place. But the modest assemblages of Uppers and Body-servants that had been held in it had never filled it; its white durastone had always looked a little empty and forlorn. Now in the glare of the yellow floodlights not only the short flights of steps around the square were packed with people, but almost the entire floor. Volunteers (partisans of Leaf?) kept pushing people back from the tiny raised area at one end that was the speaker's dais. Even while Bonnar watched, the defensive line bulged and broke, and black dots spilled out over the pavement. But a moment later the line had reformed itself further out in the square.

There was a speaker on the dais. From the strange loose gestures and rough, unintoned voice Bonnar guessed that it was Odic, even before he picked him up in the field glasses. Bonnar's party was too far from the dais for him to get more than a word now and then of Odic's speech, but the KG seemed to be talking about his childhood in the glass cage, his misery, his isolation, his despair. It seemed a strange topic on which to address a crowd that was waiting for a sight of the Green Queen, but perhaps there was some reason in it. Many people on Viridis, Lowers especially, had felt the emotions Odic described. No KG would ever admit

that his aseptic rearing in the leaded glass of the cage could have been motived by a mistaken regard for his welfare, a desire to protect him completely from radioactivity. One and all, KGs were passionately convinced that they had been treated as they had out of gloating, sadistic cruelty.

Caroline Auglinger plucked at Bonnar's sleeve. "What are we going to do?" she asked in a thready whisper.

There was no reason why she shouldn't know. "We're going into that house," Bonnar said. He indicated a darkly looming structure behind them. It was distant almost the length of the square from the dais where Odic stood. "Do you see that topmost balcony? You and I are going out on that."

"Oh," the Auglinger said.

Bonnar sent men into the house. There were voices, protests, soft cries. Once there was a thud like the noise a club makes hitting flesh. In a little while one of Bonnar's men came back to say that the house had been evacuated.

Bonnar and anti-Leaf went into the house, up, out on the balcony. At this height they could hear Odic's voice much more clearly, though the crowd seemed black and anonymous as ants. The door behind them from the balcony into the house was guarded by Bonnar's men. They would help, too, when the moment came.

Odic seemed to be getting near the end of his speech. "I felt that I had lost my soul," he boomed. "I was desperate." He made a wide, flapping gesture. KGs always suffered from impaired space perception. "I became a spy for the government. I hated everybody. And then I found my queen, the Green Queen. Queen Leaf.

"How can I tell you how it feels to get your soul back, to be human? I won't attempt to describe it. You shall see. Queen Leaf!"

He had finished. He clambered down awkwardly from the dais. Nobody else moved. The dais stood vacant. Then a woman appeared on it.

Where had she come from? It was stagecraft, of course; Leaf, after all, had been an apprentice in Veridical. Bonnar had a trick or two up his sleeve himself that he had taken over from Veridical. But it had been wonderfully managed, very effective. Almost like a miracle.

The woman, of course, was Leaf. But was woman quite the right word? It was odd what an impression of majesty, almost divinity, she gave. Bonnar fumbled with his field glasses and brought her pale face up close. He was relieved to find how much like the old Leaf she still was.

She was smiling a little. She stood quite motionless for a moment. Bonnar had time to notice how simple her green robe was, how unlike the heavy impressiveness of what Caroline had embroidered for herself. Then Leaf began to speak.

It was a simple speech. Afterwards, Bonnar couldn't remember the words she had used. She told them that they were unhappy, that she had come to help them, that she would lower the barrier. They need be afraid no longer. She was the Green Queen. She would give them the fruit of her tree to eat.

Yes, it was a simple speech.

The thousands in the square were utterly silent. People seemed to have stopped breathing. Then a clear voice on the edge of the crowd—it must have been a child's voice, it was so young and pure—said, "Are you really the Green Queen?"

"Yes," answered Leaf.

Oh, if he had been able to teach Caroline Auglinger to speak like that! Dignity, and simplicity, and the com-

pelling force of utter truth! For, whatever the case might really be, there was no doubt in this moment that Leaf deeply believed that she was the queen. Bonnar himself had felt a thrill that was almost surrender to belief pass over him at her words.

The thousands in the crowd gave in to it utterly. A long, low murmur went up from them. It sounded lazy and relaxed, almost somnolent. Then its pitch began to rise. Isolated shouts were heard.

It was time. Already Bonnar had delayed unduly. Already people nearest the dais were falling on their knees.

He picked the speaker that connected with the little receiver behind Caroline Auglinger's ear, and spoke into it. "Now," he said.

Caroline Auglinger moved forward to the edge of the balcony. She had had a heavy shot of benz, and her movements were completely steady and controlled. As she moved forward Bonnar's men turned floodlight on her and brought Veridical projectors and lenses into focus, and after a moment she seemed to be standing in a pool of fresh, spring-like light against a background of young trees.

Heads began to turn toward her. During the last part of Odic's speech Bonnar's men had hooked amplifiers around on the walls of the houses with balconies. Everybody in the square would be able to hear her. "Start talking," Bonnar said into the speaker.

Anti-Leaf's hands were gripping the rail of the balcony tightly. She hesitated, licking her lips, for a fraction of a second. Then, "She is not the Green Queen," she said.

It was not quite what she had been supposed to say, but it would do well enough. And her voice, through the amplifiers, had lost the faint edge of querulousness it usually had. "Go on," Bonnar prodded.

"She is not the Green Queen at all," Caroline repeated. "I am the Queen. That woman is lying to you. She is a trickster. She wants to trick you out of my tree and its fruit."

Heads were turning back and forth. The crowd was making comparisons between Leaf and anti-Leaf. That could be dangerous. Bonnar spoke into the microphone hastily.

"She has a man with her who confesses he was a spy," Caroline said. "Odic, his name is. Let him come forward to me."

Again, it was not quite what the Auglinger had been supposed to say. Bonnar frowned. The exact words were important, because they were keyed in with the veridical effects he had meant to produce. Was Caroline making these mistakes because she was nervous and frightened? Or was it something else?

Down at the far end of the square, around the speaker's dais, the crowd was stirring. A man leaped up on the platform, beside Leaf. He seemed about to tumble off again, but he maintained his balance, though precariously. It was Odic.

"I'll come!" he bellowed. "I'll come and face you down! This is a plot, a trick!"

He jumped down from the platform. Bonnar already had him in the field of vision of his glasses. As Odic moved slowly in behind, Bonnar pressed a button and turned a stud. Keys and tumblers began to fall in. His previously recorded veridical mask roll began to play.

It had been prepared very carefully. Bonnar's chief trouble with the mask makers had been to keep them from turning out something "effective," something theatrical and spectacular. Bonnar had insisted on an Odic only a little

exaggerated, a little caricatured. The projected Odic moved a little more uncouthly than the real one, was a little more loose-lipped and slack-jawed. But the difference made the flesh creep.

The projection, of course, was not one hundred percent coordinated with the man. It could not be, in the nature of things. But as Odic pushed his way across the square to the balcony on which Caroline Auglinger was standing, a low murmur of repulsion went up from the people next to him.

So far, so good. Bonnar broke into a weak sweat of relief. If this kept on Leaf might, after all, be defeated. Rather hesitatingly he pressed another button in the range of those on the belt around his waist.

It should have surrounded Odic with an aura of sinister, faintly purplish light, silhouetted his uncouth movements against a lurid, faintly yellowish glow. What really happened was that, on the instant, the pavement under Odic's feet was replaced by the quaking soil of a Viridian marsh. Newts slithered away from his advancing feet. In a clump of coarse-stranded marsh grass near him the discarded tail-segment of a Crotalidus rattled ominously.

Oh, the fools! Somebody had keyed in the wrong roll to that control. Or was it deliberate sabotage? Bonnar switched off the projection on the instant, but some damage had already been done. Some one laughed. "Maskart!" a voice said jeeringly. "Does the other queen think she'll fool us with maskart?"

Odic had reached the balcony. He stood before it looking upward. "You are not the queen," he said. His voice was meant to be noble, but it had the unpleasant quality of a deaf person's; Odic, like other KGs, had hardly heard

a human voice until he was six. "You are false, a liar. I throw your falsity in your face."

Caroline Auglinger threw her head back. For a moment she looked almost majestic. "I will not exchange words with you," said she. "You acknowledge openly that you are a traitor, that you have been a spy. For people like you there can be only punishment. Here it is."

She stretched out her right hand. While she had been speaking, Bonnar had given the light surrounding her a reddish tinge. Against that background a long, bright spark shot out from her hand.

It was aimed at Odic, but it died away before it could quite touch him. None the less, its effect on him was remarkable and, as far as Bonnar was concerned, unexpected. Odic's jaw dropped. He looked surprised and a little annoyed, as if he were going to sneeze. His knees bent. He stood for a moment, swaying. Then he collapsed sideways on the pavement of the square. He made a kicking motion and was still.

"He is dead," announced Caroline Auglinger. (Bonnar was not cueing her.) "So all will die who oppose the true Green Queen."

The crowd moved restlessly. The scene it had just witnessed had been dramatic, thrilling, and somehow unconvincing. There was a moment of silence. Then, from the far end of the square, Leaf spoke.

"You are not dead, Odic," she said. Her voice was perfectly audible even at that distance. "It's an—arrangement you've made with her, isn't it? Sit up. I won't buy her robe."

There was a pause. Then Odic got stumblingly to his feet. His whole long, hobbledehoy body looked ashamed. "I did it for you," he mumbled sheepishly.

"Did you think that I couldn't revive you if you were

really dead?" Leaf sighed. "So you pretended, you made an arrangement with her to magnify my power. It wasn't necessary, Odic."

Her attention turned to Caroline who was standing as if frozen, her hands clutching the rail of the balcony. "I can see the rods and wires under your robe," said Leaf, "and the man who is standing behind you with a gun. You are not happy on the balcony, you would rather be at home with your embroidery. I do not know what will become of you. But tell me. Don't you, in your heart, know that I am really the Queen?"

"Yes," answered the Auglinger.

She had spoken quickly, involuntarily, before Bonnar could dissuade or prompt her. The word had scarcely left her mouth before she realized what she had done. Her fingers went to her lips. She turned toward Bonnar and then cowered away from him again. "Don't—don't—" she said.

Everything was over, ruined, spoiled. Leaf had won. That bitch in front of him had done it. Defeat was bitter in his mouth. Bonnar fired.

He would have thought it was impossible to miss at that distance, but Caroline was bent almost double. The bolt went over her head.

She screamed at the noise. "Don't! Don't! Please don't! I'll say anything you want me to say!" She made a wild defensive gesture with her hands.

Bonnar was, after all, not responsible for her death. In her frenzy of motion, her long, heavy, embroidered sleeves caught on one of the rods beneath her dress. She pulled against it desperately, still shrieking. Caroline Auglinger had always been inept. To the onlookers it must have seemed that Bonnar fired at her and killed her. What really happened

was that, with the aid of the robe she had embroidered, she electrocuted herself.

She fell heavily against the railing of the balcony. For a moment it seemed that she would overbalance and go crashing down to the pavement below. Then she collapsed on the inside. She was already dead when Bonnar began emptying his gun at her.

Chapter 5

"AFTER she'd won there was still some resistance," Bonnar said. . . .

"She's a fake," Bonnar said aggressively. His resolute gaze travelled around the council room. His colleagues sat with lowered heads, unwilling, or afraid, to meet his eyes. But they wanted to believe him, they would believe him. He'd see that they believed.

The conference was being held on the highest floor of the Tower, so high that the pop and rattle of gunfire below was almost inaudible. They were directly under the highest part of the dome. For a moment Bonnar wondered what it would be like to live out on the surface of a planet, without either dome or barrier. The air would be fresh, there might be more food. But Tinsley was saying something. Bonnar forced his mind back to the business in hand.

". . . If she's nothing but a fake," Tinsley finished, "how do you account for her miracles?"

"Tricks. Maskart. Easily explainable," Bonnar answered positively.

A sigh of relief went up from the gathering.

"I'll explain," Bonnar continued. "Some of you, I gather, were rather disturbed by Miss Amadeus' being able to 'see' the rods hidden under our late queen-candidate's robes. You argued that such perception on her part must imply super-normal powers.

"Of course, it means no such thing. Viridis, because of the way in which it was colonized, has always been

peculiarly subject to what I may call theological credulity. All of you are familiar with the history of the Jovis migration and its slogan, 'Jovis is a first-class God.' The high degree of adaptation of Viridian plant and animal life was supposed to be explained by the intercession of Jovis, who had the planet under his special care. But perhaps you don't realize how much of the credulity that inspired the migration still remains with us, how all-too-ready we are to call what we don't understand a miracle.

"The easiest explanation for Miss Amadeus' knowledge of the rods is not that she possesses some form of cryptaesthesia. It is that Auglinger herself told Odic, in the interview in which she offered to sell out to Miss Amadeus, about the existence of the rods."

Bonnar halted. They were listening attentively. Fairfield was nodding his head slowly, as if he were beginning to be convinced. Yes, his speech was making an effect on them.

"And so on with the other 'miracles'. Miss Amadeus is a shrewd psychologist. A Lower, covered with pustules, comes to her to be healed. There are clever stage effects, a refined use of maskart, everything to conduce to an atmosphere of unquestioning belief. Miss Amadeus lays her hands on the Lower. Suddenly, he feels much better; we all know how effective mental attitude can be in securing a temporary arrest of radiation disease. And another 'miracle' has occured.

"Yes, the young lady is a fake. I am far from saying that she is a conscious and deliberate one; I believe she is self-deceived. According to her dossier card, she actually does possess some degree of ESP. But she is not the Green Queen. There is no green queen."

Bonnar lookd around him again. He read conviction on almost every face. The place at the head of the council

table, that ought to have been filled by Igon, the blue-uniformed head of the secret police, was empty. Igon had killed himself (or been killed by his subordinates—details in the report of his death could be interpreted in either way) shortly after Leaf's triumph in the Great Square. Now his organization was being reorganized. Bonnar would use all his influence to see that, when it reappeared, it would operate under strict council control. An autonomous secret police had no place in his scheme of things.

Tinsley was speaking again. ". . . I don't think any of us seriously thinks that Miss Amadeus is actually the queen. But the point I was trying to make remains. Most of the city has gone over to her. It would be almost accurate to say that what remains of the legitimate government of Viridis is under siege in the Tower." He showed his teeth at Bonnar.

Bonnar nodded. "Our friend Tinsley is quite right. Indeed, the situation is even more serious than he has indicated. I have here a report—" he picked up the sheet and showed it to them—"which I believe to be well-documented and reliable. You must prepare for a shock. It asserts that in the very near future Miss Amadeus will actually lower the barrier."

There was an instant of blank silence. Then they all began to talk at once. "I didn't think she—" "The woman's insane!" "Doesn't she realize—" "She'll kill us all." "Kill us all!" "Everyone in Shalom will die if she lowers the barrier!"

Bonnar cut across the babble of voices. "I see you realize how serious this is. There is only one way to stop the pro-queen forces. The movement would collapse completely if she were to die."

Fairfield was frowning. "I understand a number of assassination attempts have been made on her before."

"That's correct," Bonnar answered. "Five attempts, in fact. Four of them were detected before the gun could be fired or the knife used. In the fifth attempt our agent went over to her."

"If that's the case, I don't see how we could expect yet another attempt to be successful."

Bonnar smiled. "How were our attempts detected? Notice the means used—guns, or a knife."

"I'm afraid I don't get any enlightenment out of Bonnar's observation," Fairfield said after a short silence.

"Guns and knives are both metal," Bonnar explained with a faintly patient air. "The answer is obvious. Someone in Miss Amadeus' entourage has an imported metal detector."

"Then you plan to put her out of the way with something that isn't metal?"

"Yes. We will use a glass knife."

His tone should have dismissed them, but they were too curious. Nobody moved that the meeting be adjourned. Tinsley coughed. "I don't suppose you mean that about the knife quite literally, do you, Bonnar?"

"No."

Tinsley coughed again. "Then perhaps you'd better go into your plan a little. You'll want council approval of it, you know."

Bonnar flushed. He had been placed in charge of the anti-Leaf project; he had never been removed; there was no reason to think he would need council authorization for his plan. But they were looking at him curiously and a little doubtfully. Until his position was a little surer, he would need their cooperation.

"I'll be glad to explain," he said cordially. (Mentally he moved Tinsley's name to the top of his grudge list and

underscored it. He would deal with Tinsley as soon as he possibly could.) "As you know, fungus disease has been a constant problem, not only to our Body-servants, but even to a few Uppers. For four or five years, at least, there has been a council-sponsored research project working on this. In considering this—ah—difficulty with Miss Amadeus, I consulted with the project heads. And I found that in the course of their research they have bred a strain of fungus which is fatal to laboratory animals within thirty seconds. There is no reason to think it would behave any differently with a human being."

"And you plan to kill her with that? With a glass knife, in the sense of a glass test-tube?"

"Yes."

Fairfield frowned doubtfully. "It seems to me that such a virulent form of fungus disease might be a considerable danger to *us*."

Bonnar felt a thrill of temptation. It would be easy to let Fairfield and the others argue him into abandoning the test-tube idea. It might hurt Bonnar's prestige a little, but only a little. And then Leaf—No. He'd gone too far to turn back. His future depended on it.

"I don't believe so," he answered. "The fungus is strictly a laboratory production, in the sense that it could not survive under natural conditions. In a stoppered test-tube, in an atmosphere of nitrogen under two pressures, it will live indefinitely. But once it is released into the open air, it must find a host immediately, or die."

"I don't see how that keeps it from being dangerous to us," said Fairfield.

"Don't you?" Bonnar answered pleasantly. "The point is that, in a normal atmosphere, the fungus can survive for only a few seconds outside the tissues of a living host. Since

it kills the host almost as quickly as a lightning stroke would, that means that there is not much more than four or five seconds, at most, during which contact with an infected person is dangerous. Only in case someone went to Miss Amadeus' aid at the very moment when she collapsed could he be infected. Do you understand?"

"Yes . . . how does the fungus work?"

Bonnar swallowed. "It sends hyphae down the foramina of the skin. Death occurs because the blood vessels are choked by the growth of enormous masses of mycelium."

"One more question," said Tinsley. He put his fingertips together. "I don't suppose that failing in this assassination attempt would make our position any worse than it already is. But I'd like to point out to our friend Bonnar that any agent we send against the Gr— I mean, Miss Amadeus, now, is very likely indeed to go over to her. Who is going to wield the glass knife?"

Bonnar hesitated. An alarm bell was ringing in his brain. He knew perfectly well that an executive who cannot delegate responsibility, who insists on doing all his own dirty work himself, forfeits the respect of his associates. But the temptation to astound them, to make Tinsley look cheap, was irresistable. "The glass knife? I am," he said.

Getting out of the Tower was difficult. It was besieged by people who, if they did not quite warrant the title of fanatics, were resolute, vigilant, and incorruptible. Bonnar pored over maps and plans of the building fruitlessly. In the end, he had the oldest of the Tower Body-servants brought to him, a man so antique that he had been toothless as an egg for nearly thirty years. He was almost sixty, an incredible age for a Body-servant.

At first Bonnar had trouble in making him understand

what he wanted. When the old man at last comprehended, he was pessimistic and discouraging. There was no way out of the Tower except those shown on the maps, and they were all guarded from both sides. It couldn't be done.

Bonnar, again ignoring the temptation to give up, kept after him. At last the old man grew pettish. "How do you expect me to think?" he said crossly. "I'm hungry all the time. Nobody can think who's always hungry."

Bonnar restrained an impulse to chastise him. He was too important a man now to strike a Body-servant personally. "We are all hungry," he said with dignity. "I am hungry too. After we win and the legitimate government is back in power, food from the automatic farms will start coming in again. We may even lay out some new farms."

The old man laughed. "Even before the lady came, *we* didn't get enough food. Some Body-servants are hungry all their lives . . . Well." He rubbed his lip and mumbled. Bonnar waited patiently. "There used to be a sort of manhole that went out under the walls. If you don't mind a way out that's uncomfortable and pretty dangerous."

"Dangerous? How?"

"Radiation. It goes pretty deep down in the soil, and it's not lead-lined."

Bonnar felt a surge of the profound, almost instinctive horror that the idea of unshielded contact with the soil of Viridis always aroused in natives of the planet. He had to inhale and swallow before he could reply. "Show me the manhole or whatever it is. I'm willing to risk it."

"It's like a tunnel," the old man said, "but most of the time I guess it's too small to crawl in."

"How long is it?" Bonnar demanded. His heart was thudding dreadfully.

"I don't know. Long. I think it comes out this side of the Great Square."

He'd have to do it, Bonnar decided, or at least try it. But he'd always had a touch of claustrophobia; the thought of the black, poisonous passage sickened him.

"Why was it built?" he asked.

The old man shrugged. "Something about the migration. Maybe it was a place of refuge in the persecutions."

He'd make himself do it. They'd all be dead tomorrow if he didn't. But he didn't think he could make himself do it without a protective suit.

The tunnel was not so bad at first. Bonnar felt reasonably safe inside his suit, and he had had a stiff shot of benz before starting out. The test-tube—the glass knife—was strapped next to his skin just above the hip bone of his left side. The technician had assured him over and over again that the complicated release mechanism on the tube made accidental premature release of the fungus absolutely impossible. The torch in his right hand gave a bright, reassuring light.

But how narrow the tunnel was! Through the happy haze of indifference and optimism the benz had given him, Bonnar felt a recurrent wisp of fright brush him at its narrowness. As the old man had said, most of the time the tunnel was too small to allow the ease of crawling; Bonnar had to worm his way along in it.

He was sweating heavily inside the suit. The paint that the make-up specialists had used when they had applied his realistic-looking ulcers (Bonnar was going to masquerade as a Lower once he was out of the tunnel) was waterproof. But would it be proof against all the sweating he was doing? His body itched with sweat.

For a little while he was able to crawl. He had come a long way. Then the tunnel narrowed suddenly. He had to lie flat on his belly and writhe forward inch by painful inch. Remotely at first, and then with a growing sense of nearness, the question came to him: if the tunnel got too narrow for him to go forward, would he be able to work his way back?

He pushed his doubt aside. But the effect of benz is apt to wear off without warning. Bonnar had wriggled his way well under a bulging overhang of the tunnel roof when he was suddenly coldly and nakedly aware of what his situation was.

He couldn't go forward; he would never be able to get the bulky air tank on his shoulders past the overhang of the tunnel. Could he go back? He didn't think he could. To get as far as he was now, he had had to work his way past half a dozen places where only the light of the torch had enabled him to know which shoulder to depress, which knee to move. He might be able to writhe backward for fifty or seventy-five feet before he would tug and strain and pull, and nothing would happen. Seventy-five feet of painful motion. And then he'd be caught.

He was caught now, with slow death waiting for him from the long, poisonous, somehow elastic embrace of the tunnel, and quick death—the glass knife—strapped ineluctably to his side.

Horror shook him. He gave a gasp. It turned into a scream. In an instant he was screaming uncontrollably.

His screams echoed inside his helmet so loudly that they hurt his ears. As the screams went on he had moments of odd, hallucinatory pity for them. They were trapped inside his helmet, just as he was trapped inside the tunnel, and neither he nor the screams could get out.

He stopped at last and lay exhausted, sobbing weakly, his face pressed against the cheek-piece of his helmet and saliva running in a long thick strand down over his mouth.

Slowly composure, wincing and precarious, returned to him. There was, after all, a way out of a lengthy dying. He still had the glass knife.

His hand moved toward it. Then he thought, I might be able to get past the overhang of the tunnel . . . if I were out of my suit.

It was a struggle like a dying man's struggle for air to get out of the suit. The catches worked all wrong; the suit had never been designed to be removed by a man lying on his belly in a tunnel like a grave shaft. Sometimes as he strained and wrenched at the tough lead-impregnated fabric, he wondered whether he was fighting for life or for death. How long could he live without the protection of the suit?

He left the discarded suit lying behind him, a solid plug in the length of the passage. Now that he was out of it he had a strange and not displeasing sense of bodily lightness, of easy, almost slippery, mobility. The tunnel surface beneath him was smooth and moist and the air, though earth-smelling, was fresh enough. Of course, what he was afraid of in the air had no smell.

The tunnel broadened. He crawled forward for what seemed a long time. Suddenly a faint breath of air in motion touched his cheek.

Instantly he switched off his torch. The draught of air meant he must be getting near the end of the tunnel, and he did not want anyone to see light coming out of the ground.

Utter blackness settled down. It had been late at night when he started, and he did not know how long he had been

in the tunnel, but Viridian nights were always bright; the heavy darkness indicated that the opening to the tunnel was shaded or covered in some way. But there must be an opening. He clung to the thought. His limbs were shaking with relief.

The draught of air was stronger now. He put his fingers across the globe of the torch and flashed the light briefly. Yes, it was the end of the tunnel, as he had thought. It slanted up to the surface not two feet ahead of him. But a heavy tree root was growing across the opening.

It wasn't going to stop him, he wouldn't let it. He crawled to the obstruction and began digging around it with his hands. He tried to be quiet, but in a little while he was working in a sort of frenzy.

It was nearly dawn when he got out. He had come up in the midst of a clump of thick trees; his body bore long scratches from the rough surface of the roots. Where was he, anyway? Oh, yes, Tandis Park. As the old Lower in the Tower had said, it wasn't far from the square.

He had done it, gotten away from the siege, But he was worn out. He'd have to rest, sleep a little maybe. Before he killed Leaf.

He felt above his hip bone anxiously. He still had the glass knife.

It was seven or eight in the morning before he emerged from the clump of trees. The painted pustules and ulcers of his disguise had stood up wonderfully well, and the dirt and scratches he had picked up in the tunnel added realism.

He hailed a passing Lower and asked him where he could find the Green Queen. In the Renfrew Palace, the man told him, adding, with an appraising look at Bonnar's sores, "You look like you could use some help from the Lady."

Bonnar thanked him and started limping off in the

direction of the Palace. One hurdle had been passed successfully; he had spoken to a Lower, and neither his speech nor his garb had given him away.

The Renfrew Palace had been built by James Renfrew, the leader of the first wave of the triple Jovis religious migration. It was a big flat building with a snouted, curved Chinese roof, and a quite un-Chinese emphasis on the vertical elements below it. Early as the hour was, the wide vermillion doors of the palace were open, and a long line stretched away from it and down the street. Bonnar took his place at the end of the line.

He looked at the people in front of him. Lowers, mostly, with a Body-servant or two. Most of them had pustules and ulcers, sometimes quite spectacular, and all of them looked wan and sick. Immediately in front of Bonnar a man and a woman were standing. The man held a baby in his arms. There were no sores on the baby, but it cried continually.

The line moved forward steadily and at a fair speed. Bonnar felt an intense nervous apprehension. His throat was dry. He had to keep swallowing. Perhaps he should have had something to eat, and rested a little longer, before the undertaking. But every minute's delay increased the risk of detection. And it was quite in character for him, as a Lower, to look faint and weak.

The line moved forward steadily. Along the sidewalk, up the steps, through the doors. Into a hall. Bonnar, among the tatters of his kilt, fumbled with the elaborate release mechanism of the test-tube. Through the hall. Into a room. And there Leaf was.

She was wearing a simple green robe that followed the lines of her body closely, and her dark red hair was loose about her shoulders. The faint bluish nimbus that flickered

around her head was undoubtedly a piece of stagecraft, but Bonnar had a moment of genuine shock when he saw that her sandalled feet were not resting on the polished floor. She seemed to be floating some two inches above it. Magnets, magnets of course. (What sort of magnet?) Magnets.

The line moved toward her. Leaf's technique in dealing with those who had come for help was simple. She spoke a few words to them, in a voice so soft that Bonnar couldn't hear what she was saying. Sometimes she would smile a little. Then she passed her hands lightly above the surfaces of their bodies, not touching them.

Simple, but wonderfully effective. The ulcers seemed to lose their dusky color and began to granulate. The bowed bodies straightened, the shrivelled skins filled out and assumed a healthy flush. Faith-healing, of course. But a wonderful thing.

The moment Bonnar had been dreading came. He stood in front of Leaf, the test-tube in his hand. Its gray flocculence was hidden by his fingers. He fumbled with the last twist of the releasing mechanism. He kept his eyes down.

Leaf said quietly, "Bonnar, did you really think you could make yourself kill me like that?"

Horribly startled, he looked up. His heart was thudding like a hammer, shaking his whole body. Leaf was smiling rather sadly at him.

"You—yes!" he cried. "I can. I will." He wrenched wildly at the test-tube's cap.

Leaf shook her head. "You cannot. While you were waiting in the line, your fingers broke the release mechanism. You cannot evacuate the tube now."

With shaking hands he raised the tube close to his eyes and examined it. He pressed the trigger hard. Nothing happened. She was right.

"I'll—break it!" he panted.

"It would do no good. The culture is dead. Look at it," Leaf said.

Trembling, he obeyed her. And she was right again, the deadly flocculence within the test-tube had changed to a slimy, fluid green.

"I killed it," Leaf said. "I can kill by looking, you know. Don't you understand, yet, Bonnar? You made up a mask about the Green Queen. But the mask is true, not a mask, but reality. I am the queen."

He stared at her for a moment, his mind a whirlpool, a swaying chaos of belief and disbelief. Words came to his lips; he babbled something, he didn't know what. She was still smiling at him, sadly and a little tenderly.

A moment longer he stared at her, torn by doubt and a growing will to believe. Then a great wave of conviction swept over him. He could not stand against it. He surrendered to it, to an extraordinary happiness. The test-tube fell from his fingers. With a cry of rapture he threw himself at her feet.

Chapter 6

"I THINK she was lonely. She let me stay near her," Bonnar said. . . .

"I cannot sleep," Leaf was saying. She pressed her hand over her eyes wearily. "I've been awake all night, and it is nearly morning. It is strange, isn't it? I am the Queen. And yet I cannot sleep."

Bonnar had sprung to his feet the instant she came out on the balcony. He had been sleeping there, across the entrance to her rooms, guarding it. Ever since that morning in the Renfrew Palace he had clung to her—from devotion, from awe and reverence, and a little from a half-unconscious belief that clinging to her would in the long run be to his benefit. He had clung to her, and she had tolerated him.

She advanced to the edge of the balcony. Shalom lay at her feet; after her triumph she had taken a suite at the very top of the Tower, beside the council room. The moon-bright night radiance filled the sky; only scattered lights were showing in the streets. The city scarcely seemed to breathe.

"How the city has changed in the last three days," she said musingly. "Was it only three days ago, Bonnar, that I let down the barrier? Yes, only three days. I had them break

the big barrier projecting screens—there was no other way to shut it off—and for the first time in a hundred years the barrier around Shalom was down. Some people were frightened, but most of them welcomed it. They danced in the streets, they were so glad. Nobody slept that night."

Bonnar said nothing. He had been tormented by inner doubts at the time, despite his faith in the Queen; but Leaf had broken down the barrier and, it was true, nothing disastrous had happened.

"Next day, they went streaming out of the city," Leaf continued. "They knew there was a Jansen settlement near Shalom; they were going to live in the houses and till the soil. Being Lowers, they weren't afraid of radiation damage. The barrier had never given *them* much protection, and they knew I was going to make the unprotected surface habitable. Now they're straggling back, saying they're hungry. There isn't any food. . . . I wish I could sleep." Once more she laid her hand over her eyes.

Something in the way she said the last words brought memory flooding up in Bonnar. He remembered—no, was ready to re-live—the days when she had been a woman and he had been her lover. She couldn't sleep; but if he were to take her by the hand and lead her back into the bedchamber, lie down by her, enjoy her. . . . He knew how to give her sleep.

Leaf moved, and the dim blue nimbus flickered restlessly about her. Bonnar was shaken with shame and disgust. How could he have thought what he had been thinking? She was the Queen; he was someone she tolerated, as she might have tolerated a too-devoted dog. Had she been listening to his thoughts? She would hate him if she had. She had turned away; he could not see her face.

"You have many cares, Lady," he said in a submissive murmur. "It is no wonder that you cannot sleep."

"Cares? Oh, yes." She put her two hands on the rail of the balcony and leaned out over it. "What has happened to my friends?" she asked almost plaintively. "I used to have friends; now all I have is followers. The world is divided into the few who still hate me, and those who throw themselves at my feet. Isn't there anyone left who merely wishes me well? Horvendile. . . ."

Bonnar felt a pang of jealous curiosity whose strength astonished him. For a moment all he could do was to bite his lips. At last he was able to say, in a carefully controlled voice, "Yes, Lady? Horvendile?"

"Horvendile wanted to be king," Leaf answered. "He tried to tamper with the myth."

She halted. He could see her, against the glow of the sky, pushing back the mass of her hair with one hand. "Horvendile showed me who I am. He taught me many things. I suppose—I suppose that I am grateful to him. But he wanted to be my consort, to sit beside me on the throne. I caught him bribing Lowers to tell me another version of the myth, one that would have room in it for *him*. It was not just ambition. But after that I had to send him away."

So that was what had happened to Horvendile. Bonnar felt a burst of relief. The sand-haired little historian, at least, was out of the way, done for as far as Leaf went.

"You spoke of cares," Leaf was saying. "Food is the great one. The Lowers must have more food. Even before I can make Viridis fit to live in, I must feed them.

"I have been trying to get more algal from the automatic sun-tank farms. I don't know how successful—I am to hear a report on it in the council today."

She looked about her, sighing. There was a streak of faint greenish light in the sky that began to dim the lunar shining. "I must try to sleep," she said. "It will be morning in a little while."

"Yes, Lady," Bonnar said. He bowed deeply, bending forward from the waist. "Sleep well. I wish you sleep."

She went in, closing the balcony door behind her. For a moment Bonnar looked after her. Then he lay down in front of the threshold. He would guard her, whether or not she slept.

Even an absolute monarch must have a council to advise, ministers to govern through. Leaf sat with her bent head resting on her doubled fist, gravely listening to Tinsley's report on the automatic farms. "So," she said when he had finished, "it will be at least six months before I can expect any significant increase in algal production from the farms?"

Tinseley (she had copted him from the old Upper cabinet; he had, it seemed, long been a secret sympathizer of hers) nodded soberly. "That is so, my Lady. Even with the new tanks you have ordered, it will be six months before the supply of non-polluted algal will be especially larger. Polluted food is in plentiful supply as usual, of course."

"I can't give them polluted food," Leaf said, as if to herself.

There was an instant's silence. Then Odic struggled to his feet. "Lady! My Lady!" he croaked. He made one of his big flapping gestures. "May I have your gracious permission to speak?"

"Yes, Odic."

Odic turned red and stammered. He sawed the air with his hands. He seemed to be strangling with emotion, with sincerity. "Lady," he said when he had at last succeeded

in pushing words past the block in his throat, "Lady, I want to warn you. You must be on your guard."

"I am an Upper. By birth I am kin to the best of the Uppers. Only the finest lineage was considered precious enough to merit the protection of the cage." Odic's mouth twisted in a burst of bitterness. He stopped to choke and cough.

"As I say, I am an Upper," he continued. "So, though they know I belong to you, I hear things. Lady, they are plotting against you. Be on your guard."

Leaf was unimpressed. She did not lift her hand from the hand that was propping it. "That is nothing new," she answered. "I can look into men's hearts."

"Yes, but Lady, you have the Lowers to fear also. Do you not understand about people like that? So long as they are held down they are pitiable. But when they become freer they are full of hate. People who have suffred as much as they have are always bad."

"Already they talk against you. Already there is muttering in the streets. If you fail them, they will tear you in pieces. Lady, forgive me." Odic clasped his hands together before his face and gave her one of his wild, supplicating glances. "But do you intend to give them unpolluted food, make the surface of Viridis habitable?"

"Yes, Odic."

"Forgive me! But, Lady, how?"

The question seemed to reverberate in the air. Queen Leaf hesitated. It was not that she was in any degree shaken; but she seemed to hesitate. Bonnar sprang to his feet.

"My Lady, Queen Leaf," he said in a tone that was heavy with a perfectly sincere respect, "I am not even a council member. I live only at your will. But may I speak?"

"Who—? Oh, it's Bonnar." Queen Leaf had, he perceived,

forgotten the man who had been sitting at her feet. "Speak, then. But be brief."

They were all looking at him—whispering, identifying him as a man who had been important in the old government and gone over at the spectacular last moment to the Green Queen. Bonnar was not displeased. He turned to Odic.

"Who are you," he demanded, "to ask your Queen questions? Are you her equal? She is the queen, and she is not accountable to anyone—to *anyone*—for what she does or does not do. Not to the Lowers—" here Bonnar laughed—"or to you, Odic."

He turned to the Queen before the former KG could answer. "My Lady," he said, speaking with his head respectfully bowed, "It is not right that you should be vexed by discontented Lowers. People like that are never satisfied. If they talk against you, they must be stopped.

"The old government had means of stopping them. Those means still exist. Igon is dead, but the secret police could be revived. It has been a long time since a verbal mask has been implanted, but that maskart still lies ready to the Green Queen's hand.

"My Lady, you may use what means you will. If you choose to send the Lowers down Stairs again—or re-erect the barrier—who has the right to complain?" Leaf had made a gesture of repugnance; Bonnar hurried on. "You must have time to carry out your plans. In the end, you will free the whole planet and give us all unpolluted food. Until then, it is your right—almost your duty—to rule.

"Forgive me, Lady." He bowed very low. Then he sat down at her feet.

"I am the queen, yes," Leaf answered. "I will not rule in that way."

She stood up. The pale blue halo about her had grown

stronger. "I am grateful to Odic—and Bonnar—for having tried to help me solve my problems," she said. "But they are *my* problems. They will be solved, and solved soon.

"The council meeting *is* dismissed."

She sat down again. The council members rose and filed past her. Each, as he passed, bowed almost to the floor. If this council meeting had done nothing else, it had rendered more complete her ascendency.

The big room grew empty. Leaf remained sitting, her head resting on her hand. At last Bonnar said, in a soft, flat voice, "My Lady, what will you do now?"

He had spoken so softly that she may have thought his voice a part of her own thoughts. "I will find my consort," she answered. "I am going to my tree."

The resolve, announced only to Bonnar, had somehow spread through the city. It brought with it an immediate lessening of tension. The complaints, the muttering, ceased. A tender expectation took their place. Strangers spoke to strangers, smiling, and their talk was always of the good days that were coming. And over and over again one heard the words, "The Queen . . . her consort . . . the tree . . . the tree . . . the tree. . . ."

On the morning of the day after the scene in the council room, Queen Leaf left the city. She had refused all company on her mission except Bonnar's; he was even to pilot the 'copter for her. At first he had been almost tremulous with happiness at her preference for him; then it occured to him that she wanted him with her because he offered her the sort of companionship an unusually intelligent dog would have given her. Later, too, he wondered whether there had not been a sort of prescience in her insistence that no one but he should be present when she met her divine consort.

The 'copter lifted smoothly and was out through the opened section in the Dome. The clear green light of day came brightly through the molded gelglass cabin. Bonnar stole a glance sideways at Leaf. She was sitting quietly beside him with her hands in her lap. The nimbus shone wanly around her head.

How different this was from the other trip he had taken with her outside Shalom! She had been still a woman then, or only a little more than a woman, and she had worn one of the protective suits. (Today she had refused the suit, saying that she didn't need it, and that perhaps soon no one would need it.) Horvendile had been with them then; the cabin of the plane had been crowded and small.

And yet there were similarities, too. Today, as on that day so many months before, he was helping Leaf to hunt something. What, and where it was, then as now only she could tell. "The tree." Yes, but what did that mean? Who, except Leaf, could tell what was meant by "The Green Queen's golden tree of life?"

Almost as soon as the 'copter was clear of the city she had him go south. He obeyed quickly, proud of his skill in piloting. They beat a wide path back and forth, due south, for perhaps a hundred miles. Then she had him turn so they were headed west.

The beating back and forth continued. He was not the least tired, not the least worried, but he wondered about the Queen. But her orders were always given in a calm, low voice, and her hands, when he looked at her, were resting quietly in her lap.

Once he sighed. She must have thought him impatient, for she said, as if in explanation, "It isn't easy, Bonnar. It is like trying to locate the source of an echo in a big, empty, echo-resounding room. You could stand at a hundred

different spots along the smooth walls, and hear the echo loud and clear, but it would be always an echo, not the first voice.

"It is that way with the tree. Again and again I feel the tree strongly, but it is always an echo, never the thing itself. Something in the air of Viridis sends the—tree impulse echoing back."

At noon she had him stop. She sat quietly in the cabin while he stretched his legs in the open, drank nutrisoup, and relieved himself. Then they went on with the search.

They had been going west for a long time when she had him turn south once more. Bonnar, looking at the moving green line on the map that marked their airline distance from Shalom, saw that it was rather more than a thousand miles. They had come much further than that, of course.

Darkness came on, and still they had not found what she was hunting. Something—not quite a fear, perhaps an uncertainty—was beginning to stir in him.

He set the 'copter down in a clearing, as she bade him. He drank nutrisoup for his supper; Queen Leaf ate a little fruit, saying that since she had been Queen, she had not been hungry. "I miss being hungry, sometimes," she said.

The night-glow, as usual, filled the sky. Bonnar said, "Forgive me, Lady. But could we not go on with the search, now that we have eaten? I think there is plenty of light."

"Queen Leaf shook her head. "No, it's no use. As soon as the sun sets the air becomes filled with echoes and confusions. I could be two feet from the tree, and not know it at night."

He passed the night on the ground outside the 'copter. He did not worry about Felodons or Crotalidi, since he was

with the Queen. Once he heard her cough and stir within the cabin, and wondered sleepily whether she slept.

Next day was bright and pleasant. Leaf had him pilot the 'copter due south again. The pleasant, gentle landscape of Viridis slid by beneath the molded nose of the ship. Low hills, slow, winding rivers, glinting in the sunlight, a long volcanic slope crowned with a plume of gray smoke, once one of the deadly "hot" radiation areas. They had come much further from Shalom today.

Today Leaf seemed restless. She rubbed her hands back and forth over her eyes, moved in her seat, shivered. It was some two hours past noon when she said to Bonnar suddenly "I do not understand this."

His heart was pounding. He didn't know what he was afraid of. "What, Lady?" he asked unceremoniously.

"That—let the ship hover, Bonnar. Just here. Yes. Set it down."

He obeyed. Leaf opened the left-hand cabin door and stepped out. She seemed to sway a little as the sunlight fell on her. Her face was pale.

"Are you ill, Lady?" he asked breathlessly.

"No, not that. But it is very strange. I don't understand."

"What? What, my Queen."

"Why, the tree is here. Just here." She made a gesture and for a moment he could see a tall, shadowy tree reaching up toward heaven, while golden globes shone with a steady, mysterious light among its branches. "And yet there is nothing. There is nothing here at all except grass."

It was true. They stood on a long, sloping plain that might have been the talus of a volcano. The grass blew away from them in long ripples as the wind stirred it. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing like a tree.

Their glances met. Bonnar swallowed. He said, "It has been a long time. Many things could happen to a tree."

"Yes. . . . Go back to the ship's cabin, Bonnar. I will sit here and wait."

He did as she told him. She had seated herself in the deep grass. It came up so high around her that only her head and shoulders were visible. The moments passed.

Section Three: The Tree

Chapter 7

"THE LONG GRASS made a sighing noise," said Bonnar. . . .

It was nobody, only the wind, but Leaf had risen to her feet and was looking about her anxiously. After a little while she sat down again. The pale blue nimbus flickered around her with surprising brightness.

How many times had she got to her feet and looked about her while they had been waiting? It had been early afternoon when Bonnar had put the 'copter down on the slope, and now the shadows were beginning to lengthen. Time after time she had started up, hopefully and eagerly, and it had never been anything except the wind.

Bonnar, who was still sitting in the 'copter, gave a long, trembling sigh—a sigh that was partly fatigue, partly nervous tension, and partly slowly-emerging fear. Suppose—it was only a supposition—but suppose that the mask he had created about the Green Queen had been wrong in this one respect: that the Green Queen's consort did not exist. What would happen if Queen Leaf went back to Shalom without the divine spouse she had been supposed to meet?

That she had not been able to find the tree she sought meant nothing, since only Leaf and himself were aware of her failure. But would she be able to solve the problems of her government without at least some semblance of the consort legend assigned to her? She had averted serious domestic difficulties only by setting out to find the tree. And most of the Uppers were still opposed to her; her absence

from the city would have given them time to organize against her. He must try to think.

Leaf had risen to her feet again, and this time she did not sit down. Her gaze was fixed on a point behind Bonnar, a spot toward which the opaque portion of the 'copter walls prevented him from looking. She was leaning forward a little, very serious and intent. Was it—did she—?

Bonnar jumped from the 'copter and ran toward her. His heart was thudding heavily. When he reached her, he turned and looked where she was looking. A man was coming toward them, around the long, grass-covered slope.

He was still a long way off, but even at that distance Bonnar found him puzzlingly familiar. When he got a little nearer, Bonnar recognized him. It was Horvendile.

The historian was taking long, quick strides through the deep grass. Like Leaf herself, he wore no protective suit. He was carrying something in his right hand that dragged behind him in the grass.

Bonnar stiffened. He glanced at Leaf—Queen Leaf—and saw that though she was watching Horvendile intently, her face was expressionless. He laid his hands nervously on his guns.

Horvendile was winded when he got up to them. "Hello, Leaf," he said gaspingly. "I've come—if it isn't down too deep, that it—to help you dig up what you might call your tree." He showed them what he had been carrying in his right hand. It was a spade.

Bonnar stepped forward. "She's the Queen, the Green Queen," he said roughly. "You'll address her respectfully, as she deserves."

Horvendile paid little attention. He seemed to be sniffing at the air. "It's about here, I guess," he said. He set the spade in the grass and stepped down on it with the weight

of his body. "As far as Leaf's being the Green Queen goes, she isn't. Not, that is, unless her name is Merakis." He smiled as if he had made a little joke.

Bonnar felt the hot blood burn in his face. He pulled one of his blasters half way from the holster. Leaf made a gesture that seemed to push him into the background. "Be quiet," she ordered.

"Horvendile, what did you man by that?" she asked. "How did you get here? What are you doing here?"

Horvendile was digging steadily, throwing the big, long-grassed clods to one side. "Why, to answer your questions a little out of order, my dear, I've been waiting for you nearly a week, out of sight on the other side of the talus of the volcano. I knew you'd come here sooner or later, hunt the tree. It's really the original Green Queen's message beacon, you know, and it's what you were hunting the first time you left Shalom, when you saw the space ship after the earthquake had shifted it."

Queen Leaf pushed her long, bright hair back from her face. "Why—what are you doing here?" she asked.

Horvendile's face changed a little. He stopped digging for a moment. "Oh, I wanted to see you again," he said with an airy wave of the hand. "We used to be friends, Leaf."

"That was a long time ago. I am the Green Queen now."

"No, you're not," said Horvendile, going back to his excavation. "The original Green Queen came to Viridis about 22,000,000 years ago—notice the time, Leaf, and bear in mind that the half-life of neptunium is 20,000,000 years—when the surface of Viridis was, h'um, shimmering with radioactivity. There was even a little plutonium around then. The original Green Queen didn't come here on purpose, though she had a cargo of small, useful life forms in the hold of her ship and intended to colonize a suitable planet;

she was shipwrecked. I rather suspect—we'll know better after we dig up the beacon—that the cause of the wreck was a revolt among her servants. She had a great many servants. I also imagine she had four or five consorts, at least, not just one."

"But—"

"Why couldn't you be she, or a sort of reincarnation of her? Well, in the first place, Queen Merakis not only wasn't divine, she wasn't even particularly good or moral. In the second place, and a more cogent objection, she wasn't a human being at all. She was a sort of winged ant."

Bonnar had listened to Horvendile's discourse with growing apprehension. What he himself thought of its content he scarcely knew; he was wholly concerned with its effect upon Leaf. It would be bad enough for Leaf to return to Shalom without her divine lover. That would be a misfortune that might lead to a catastrophe in the end. But for Horvendile to convince Leaf that she was not the Green Queen would be disaster unqualified.

For a moment he thought of drawing his blaster and shooting Horvendile as he dug. The little historian's back was half turned toward him; he would be dead before he could defend himself. But Leaf might resent it, and she was, after all, the Queen, with the power of instant death in her hands.

"He's lying," he said hoarsely. "Don't believe him Leaf. He's an agent of the Uppers. They've sent him here to persuade you so they can get back into power again."

Leaf shook her head. The blue radiance shimmered around her wanly. "Be quiet," she told Bonnar once more. Then, to Horvendile, "I don't think that you are lying. And yet I know now that I never was the queen—why did you teach me that I was?"

Horvendile's face twitched. He threw down his spade on the edge of the hole he had been digging. "I wish you hadn't brought that big selfish blockhead with you," he said bitterly. "His damned ears soak up everything. Why, Leaf, don't you know why I did it? I was—I was crazy about you—"

He swallowed. "I never had a girl like you before," he said difficultly. "Really a woman. Most girls are a little bit men, I think. I wanted to keep you. I thought you'd like me better—that I'd have more of a hold on you—if I taught you to be the queen.

"I broke my promises when I did it. Serious promises, too." He made a little twisted smile. "Nothing could have been more serious. But I wanted to keep you. I was in love with you, Leaf."

"Promises?" Queen Leaf questioned.

"Yes." He had picked up the shovel and was going on with his digging. "I was one of the inner circle of the Apple Pickers, the elect. We had dedicated ourselves to finding out the truth about Viridis and setting it free. I was supposed to teach you to play, as a conscious thing, the part of the Queen. We had come to believe that radioactivity was not a serious danger on Viridis. You were to lower the barrier, just as you did, and declare that the surface of the planet was habitable. But I fell in love with you. I wanted you to have real power. And I taught you that you were really the Queen."

"Don't you see why he's saying this?" Bonnar broke in desperately. "He's jealous. He wants you back. He thinks that if he can convince you that you're not really the queen in the legend, he can get you back in bed with him again."

Leaf appeared to pay no heed to the familiarity, but her face lightened. "Yes, that could be," she said thoughtfully.

"I can't see very far into his mind—there is too much power in this place—but I know that he is jealous.

"Horvendile, you have said many things—very surprising things—about the first Green Queen and how she came here. Do you have any proof for what you have said?"

"Proof?" answered Horvendile. He had been digging steadily, and by now the hole was about four feet deep and three feet across. It didn't appear that he was expecting to dig up anything very big. He enlarged the sides of the hole with the shovel before he spoke again.

"Well, Leaf, if you think I'm lying, nothing that I say I saw myself could constitute proof. For example, a friend of mine and I dug up the original Green Queen's ship a couple of weeks ago. I could tell you about all the trouble we had getting it up from where it was and how closely it resembled your cryptaesthetic perception of it and about the fossilized ant we found inside it, and so on. But if you think I'm lying you'd think I made it up.

"The same thing is true about the readings of radioactivity my friend and I got out in the field last year with 'uncalibrated' instruments he'd smuggled in from earth. I don't particularly enjoy being called a liar, anyhow.

"But you want proof. Perhaps the fact that you can't find your tree and that your consort doesn't come isn't really much in the way of evidence. The mask might just be wrong on these two points.

"But be patient a little longer. In the next five minutes or so I'm going to come up with the final evidence, the irrefutable proof."

Neither Leaf nor Bonnar made any answer. The long grass blew in the wind, and the clods Horvendile tossed up over the side of the hole made a settling noise. In a little

more than the five minutes the historian had predicted his spade struck with a clang against metal.

Bonnar directed an anxious glance at Leaf, but she was not even looking at what Horvendile was doing. She was half turned away, watching the sky for the divine consort who would come.

Chapter 8

"HE LEVERED it up with the shovel," Bonnar said. . . .

Queen Merakis' message beacon was a flattish, gold-colored ellipse, about ten inches long on the larger axis, with a thin spire, forked at the tip, rising from a boss at its center. It seemed to be exceedingly heavy for its size; Horvendile was sweating with exertion when he laid it on the edge of the hole he had dug.

"The proof," he said. He clambered up out of the hole and sat down beside the object. "The proof. And incidentally—" his manner grew faintly professorial and didactic—"the source of many peculiarities in Viridian social structure and anomalies in Viridian social life."

"What's that got to do with anything?" demanded Bonnar. The production of the object from the bottom of the hole had not impressed him; he had known, after all, that there must be something there or Horvendile would not have dug; but he was on fire to spike the fellow's guns. "Are you going to sit there and lecture us?"

Queen Leaf had been looking at the message beacon with remote, dispassionate eyes. Now she turned her gaze on Bonnar. The latter, after a moment, bit his lip. To Horvendile she said, "Go on talking until you are done."

Horvendile nodded. "Queen Merakis' beacon is the cause—the 'onlie begetter,' as the old poet would say, of as consistent and stubborn a group neurosis as one would want to encounter. As with a neurosis, everything is interpreted in terms of the original experience. Or you could

call it paranoia—it's an internally consistent, organized, dominant system of delusory ideas." He cleared his throat.

"What are the psychological realities that underlie Viridian social life?" he continued. "I think you'll agree that they are guilt and punishment for the Lowers and anxiety for the Uppers. And for everybody alike there is, constantly, fear.

"Evidence which would tend to disprove the necessity for these psychological orientations is disregarded, and everything, even inanimate objects, is forced into the frame. The writhing trees, for example, which are no more sentient than Mimosa pudica on earth is, have been made the subjects of a, logically, quite ridiculous story about human beings who were transformed into trees as a punishment for some unspecified guilt, and the story is widely believed.

"Again the frame. Guilt. Punishment. Fear."

He paused. "Prove it," Bonnar said truculently. He had decided on the line he would take: that Horvendile, from A to Z, was lying. "How did you know the beacon was there, if you didn't put it there yourself? Prove the things you've said."

Horvendile looked angry, but he only sighed. "Will you say that, because Leaf knew the beacon was here, she buried it?" he asked mildly. "After my friend and I dug up the original green queen's ship, I had an inkling of what Leaf had been hunting the first time she left Shalom. I got a fix on the beacon from three different points, and the lines intersected here. I have some ESP myself, you know, though not nearly so much as Leaf has. In this case, it was probably an advantage not to have so much, since I wasn't confused by reverberations from the beacon.

"But Bonnar will say none of this is really proof. Well. . . ."

He studied the beacon closely for a moment or two. Then he turned a tiny lever that, about two inches up, projected

from the shaft of the forked spire. He frowned. After an instant he gave the lever two opposite turns.

Bonnar had the impression that the sky had suddenly darkened. He looked up, perplexed. No, it was still light, though sunset was approaching. But a darkness almost palpable had descended on him. A cloud of horror wrapped his brain.

The ground where he stood was dangerous. That was the first of the realities. It was alive with danger; even in his protective suit he could hope to survive only a few hours. He looked at Leaf and Horvendile, naked against the danger, and was astonished to find them blackening and writhing from the upward rain.

He knew whose fault the danger was. It was the Lowers who had done it. Instead of feeding him, as their duty was, they had condemned him to this horror, this momentary expectation of flayed and blasted death.

Why did they hate him so? He had never done anything to them but give them their legitimate uses. But their hate was so great that they didn't care in the least what happened to *them,* so long as he suffered. It was a selfishness he couldn't fathom. He felt like screaming with horror at their hate, their stupidity.

They'd be punished when—if, if, if—he was rescued. Nothing could be too bad for them then. But the rescue ship must come soon. The danger was sickening. If the ship didn't come soon, he couldn't live.

He turned his eyes to the sky again, this time looking for rescue. It was empty, there was nothing in the darkening hemisphere that promised hope. He moaned. The ship, the rescue ship—when would it come? Hurry, hurry. Oh, the ship!

Horvendile had bent over the beacon again. Once more

he twisted. Bonnar felt the cloud of horror around him lift.

He licked his lips. They were salty. Sweat was running down his face. His whole body, inside his protective suit, was soaked with sweat.

"You see?" said Horvendile. "I stepped up the output of the transmitter a little, that was all. Do you see how that sort of thing, even at a lower power, could have affected Viridian society?

"Once one becomes aware of the constant psychological pressure from the beacon, many peculiar features in that society become explicable." He twinkled. "Its division into three castes, which correspond to the ant people, their personal attendants, and their cattle. The Uppers' unreasoning belief that the Lowers—who ought, by ant standards, to be supplying them with a sweet nourishing secretion—are somehow failing in their duty. The society's toleration of women who live only for childbearing, as a termite queen lives only to lay eggs. The conservatism, even the backwardness, of Viridian life. And even the rearing of the KGs in their crystal cells has its parallels with other insect societies, though I don't want to overstress this.

"But the most striking thing, of course, is the fear that everybody on Viridis has of radiation damage. That fear, except for a few areas, is quite unjustified at present. But it was fully justified at the time Merakis lived."

"But—I don't understand." Leaf sounded puzzled. "I could lift the barrier because I was the queen, and people would not be hurt. But radiation damage is real. Many have died from it."

"They have not," Horvendile contradicted flatly. "Fungus disease has killed a few Lowers. But the radiation lesions have been psychosomatically produced. People have died of fear."

"I can't believe you," Leaf responded. "Certainly, I felt the emotions of which you spoke when you turned the transmitter up just now. But how does it work?

"And—you say that I am not the queen. Horvendile, I could kill you as you sit there, just by raising my hand. I don't understand what you have been saying. But I *am* the Queen."

Bonnar, despite his recent experience, felt a tremulous hope. If Leaf continued to assert herself, the situation could yet be saved.

Horvendile laughed. "Of course you could kill me, my dear. I never doubted it. But where does your power come from? From the beacon Queen Merakis had set up.

"What the beacon is, is a sort of mechanical telepath. It works by inducing, in the recipient, emotions identical to those the sender felt. It is powered, I believe, by uranium salts, which have a long half-life.

"Now, telepathy—" Horvendile rubbed his nose—"telepathy is something we still don't know too much about. I have been told by specialists that, while it isn't part of the electromagnetic spectrum of energy, it is capable, under suitable conditions, of being translated into that spectrum and back again. You must remember, in listening to my explanation, that I am only a historian.

"Queen Merakis' message beacon was set up roughly 22,000,000 years ago. The message was never received, for reasons I'll go into a little later, and the rescue ship never came. Merakis and all those with her—consorts, children, body attendants and, ah, lacteal sources—died from radiation. But the message kept on being given out.

"Why did the ant people make such an improbably durable beacon to transmit a message that would need to be transmitted only a little while? They even equipped it with a

flotation device in the bottom to keep it above any possible lava flows. That's why I had to dig down only a few feet to find it, after all those millions of years.

"It's only a guess, of course, but I imagine they were incapable of building anything that *wasn't* improbably durable. Their culture was ages old before they were wrecked on Viridis—an old culture, a highly envolved one, and one that had lasted without change for countless millenia. Naturally, anything they built was durable. But that's by the by.

"As I was saying, the message never got out. It didn't get out because Viridis was surrounded then—and is surrounded now—by a layer of ionized water molecules. It was even thicker in the days of Merakis. And it acted as an almost perfect insulator against the telepathic impulses.

"All clear so far, Leaf, my dear?"

The sun had set; the moon-bright radiance was beginning to fill the sky. Leaf said, "Yes, it is an explanation. But look." She held out her hand, and bluish light dripped from it. "Explain that."

Horvendile nodded, but he seemed a little disturbed. "I hope you don't still think that your consort—" he mumbled. "Well!" He cleared his throat.

"Ever since the beacon was set up, impulses from it have been retained within the atmosphere of Viridis, in a sort of greenhouse effect. By now there is an enormous amount of telepathic, uhm, energy available. Don't you remember that I said that that energy was translatable into the familiar electro-magnetic spectrum? In the first days of our association, Leaf, you unwittingly produced some telekinetic phenomena. It was possible. What I did, Leaf, was to teach you how to turn some of the energy from the beacon into electrical and radio impulses. A long-dead researcher, Sig-

mund Freud, said that the psyche is basically electrical. And your 'miracles,' Leaf, are at bottom electricity."

He halted. "I wish I hadn't done it," he said rather plaintively. "Taught you to be the queen, I mean. It seemed to be a good idea at the time. But as our special group within the Apple Pickers used to say, 'There's a serpent in every bushel of apples.' That was an awfully useful slogan for piquing people's curiosity."

The time had come, Bonnar saw, for him to speak. "You're lying," he said lightly but postively. "You put that contraption there yourself, and it's not a beacon, it's a supersonic wave generator, or perhaps a projector in maskart."

Horvendile shrugged. He was still sitting on the ground beside the golden ellipse. "Why should I bother to convince you?" he asked.

"Because," Bonnar retorted, "I have some influence with L—with the Queen.

"If the projector's as important as you say, shut it off. You say it's been going for millions of years, but even so, shutting it off ought to make some difference.

"Shut it off. Then Leaf and I can tell whether or not you're lying. Shut it off."

Horvendile seemed undecided. He put his face down close to the ellipse and studied it. "I don't think they meant it to be shut off easily," he murmured. "They'd be afraid their Lowers. . . ."

He fingered the forked tip of the spire thoughtfully. "I wish we had a little more light," he said, "but—" His other hand went out.

Just before he twisted the spire on its base Leaf cried out. It was a cry of warning, of insight, of sudden fear. "Horvendile! Don't! They meant it to Kill!"

It was already too late. An intolerably bright light shot

out from the top of the spire and bathed Horvendile's body. It was so bright his flesh seemed transparent from it. Bonnar raised his arm to shield his eyes from the light.

When he put his arm down again, Horvendile's body was sliding slowly forward into the hole he had taken the beacon from. At last the serpent in the bushel of apples had crawled out.

Chapter 9

"IT WAS odd how quiet it felt after he shut the beacon off," Bonnar said. His throat seemed to be getting tired. "They say everyone in Shalom felt it too. It was like a noise stopping that you've been hearing all your life. . . ."

Leaf turned her head from side to side, looking around her slowly. She seemed to be awakening from a dream. "Horvendile," she said in an uncertain voice, "Oh, Horvendile!" And then, more quickly, "The one who loved me is dead. And the one who loves power goes on living. That's odd."

For a moment she covered her face with her hands. But when she took them down she seemed, as far as Bonnar could judge in the bright moon-glow, composed and dry-eyed.

Bonnar said, in a voice that was louder and more self-confident than he felt, "The wrath of heaven smote him, my Queen!"

Leaf shook her head. "No, it was not heaven. It was a trigger—an arrangement—on the beacon made so that none of the ant-people's servants would dare tamper with it. The servants did not want the rescue ship to come, since their punishment then would be worse than dying on Viridis could be."

Bonnar let out his breath. "Do you believe all that stuff he told us?" he demanded.

There was a long pause. Then Leaf answered, "Yes.

"I am not the queen. I have no consort. What I believed was, all of it, nothing. The myth of the Green Queen was a mask you made up—I am not *any* queen."

In a welter of impulses, among which was certainly some

altruism, Bonnar started toward her and tried to put his arm around her. She pushed him away.

"Don't," she said. "You don't want me any more, now that you know I'm not the queen or anyone important. Go on back to Shalom, Bonnar. Take care of your own interests. That's what you want to do."

He licked his lips. It must be true, because she said it was; and yet the words seemed to have stabbed him in the heart. In the glow from the sky he tried to study her face. It was difficult: she had sunk down in the grass as if she were exhausted, and her head was bent. The halo of light around her had almost completely died away.

Bonnar swallowed. "But Leaf," he said, "have you considered—I mean, it isn't really hopeless. You may not be the queen, but you can still do the things you used to do. There's still plenty of power for the—the miracles. If we go back to Shalom soon. . . ."

Once more he swallowed. He couldn't see her face at all. "I could play the part of your consort," he said, almost diffiidently. "If I disguised myself carefully. We could work it, I think."

Leaf laughed. It was an odd, high sound. "Oh, *Bonnar!*" she said. Despite her laughter, he had a momentary impression that she was weeping. Then she said, "You know I could not do that."

There must be something he could say. He couldn't endure her being so wretched. "Yes," he conceded. "But look here, Leaf." He had thought of a good, a splendid, argument. "Suppose you don't go back to Shalom, don't carry on with the role of queen. What will happen? What was on the edge of happening when you went away?

"The Uppers will seize power again. They are better organized than their opponents, more used to ruling, more

intelligent. Everything you got for the Lowers will be swept away. They may even be worse off than they were before, since the Uppers will punish them for having rebelled against their authority.

"I know you wouldn't masquerade as the queen for your own benefit. But don't you think you owe it to the people who've trusted you, to your followers? Some of them risked a lot to support you. You wouldn't want them to suffer.

"Go back with me to Shalom. Play the role of the queen a little longer. Help the people of Viridis over a difficult time."

He looked at her anxiously. Surely it would work, she was so gentle and brave and good. Leaf would never desert people who needed her. He must make her go back with him. He couldn't leave her here.

She raised her head and was looking at him. "I—yes, you are right. I'll try. I'll go."

She seemed to have trouble in rising. He started toward her eagerly, ready to help her up. But when he got to her she had sunk back and was sitting with bowed head, as still as a stone.

"I can't," she said without looking at him. "I thought I could. But I haven't anything left.

"I'm sorry, Bonnar. I would if I could. I don't want anybody to suffer. Can you understand? I haven't anything left.

"Go back to Shalom yourself. That's what you want to do."

Again he felt the stab at his heart. Was it true? Did he want to leave her? "Do you want me to go?" he asked at last. "I'll go if you really want me to."

"What? Oh . . . Yes."

He started toward the 'copter then. He turned when he

had nearly reached it. "Good-bye, Leaf," he said. He felt something painful and sore in his throat. "Leaf, good-bye."

She did not answer. The halo around her had died away completely. He could not see her face. But he had the impression that she was as pale as death.

"So I came back to the city," Bonnar finished. His talking seemed to have done him good; he was definitely calmer than he had been when he began, and for the last half-hour or so he had drunk no more eth. "I tried to get back in quietly, but people were already nervous. They stopped me at the Dome and asked me a lot of questions.

"All I could think of to say was that the queen was still beside the tree, waiting for her consort. It wasn't good enough. When the news leaked out—that was late last night—the street fighting began. It's been going on all day.

"I wish I could contact Tinsley. He was one of the queen's most enthusiastic supporters, and together we might be able to work out something. Another queen, for example. But I can't locate any of her old people, and as I said before I simply can't tell which way the cat is going to jump. So I went back to my old office. That's how you happened to find me in."

"Um. Is it really so important to you, Bonnar, knowing which way the cat is going to jump?"

"She said it was," Bonnar replied defensively.

"I know. But is it true?"

There was a very slight pause. Then Bonnar answered, "No. No, of course it's not. I don't give a damn about what happens in Shalom. All I can think about is her.

"By the way, I've been wondering. Were you the friend that helped Horvendile dig up the ship and get readings of radioactivity in the open with 'uncalibrated' instruments? It sounds like the sort of thing a Foundation man would do."

"Eh?" Jeff answered. He sounded abstracted. "No, it

wasn't I. It might have been Clovis, from Rockefeller. He's interested in Viridian archaeology."

"You said something about discoveries you'd made," Bonnar persisted. "Something you thought should be publicized. What was that?"

"What you already know—that radioactivity, except in a few bad areas, isn't a serious danger on Viridis. . . . Look here, Bonnar. You keep bringing up these extraneous things. Why? You're not really interested. But you try to present yourself to me as a man who cares only for his immediate selfish interests. Is it true?"

"I—always thought of myself that way," said Bonnar. He got up and began to walk restlessly up and down the room.

"Yes,"

"I suppose I do it," said Bonnar, turning toward Jeffery suddenly, "so I won't realize how badly I've behaved."

"A lot of people on Viridis have behaved badly," Jeffery commented. He went behind the bar, hunted around until he found a bottle of soda, and opened it. He poured into his and Bonnar's glass.

"Have some," he said. "You sound dry. Viridis has always been a cruel planet. I expect Queen Merakis' beacon has had a lot to do with it."

Bonnar picked up his glass and put it down again. "I needn't have behaved as badly as I did," he said. "You see, Jeffery, talking to you has made me realize that I—I failed her. Three times."

"Go on."

"She was in love with me, and I knew it. At first, I mean. But I broke off with the affair. I sent her away."

"Considerable pressure was being used on you."

Bonnar gave a short laugh. "A man oughtn't to yield to pressure where his girl is concerned."

"You're perfectly right. But sometimes men do."

Bonnar sighed. "It's not only Leaf." He rubbed his hands over his face. "There's that Lower I told you about. How I treated him. It makes me hate myself."

"If the scene in his—what d'ye call it—habit, was as you've described it," Jeffery said dryly, "you have the right to appropriate a considerable portion of self-hate. But beating your own breast won't do him any good."

"I know. But mainly, it's Leaf. I thought about her all night. I couldn't sleep. I thought of her sitting there all alone under the glow of the sky. I went away and left her. Alone. Exhausted. With a dead man."

"She told you to go."

"Did I have to obey her?" Bonnar asked fiercely. "It was the final betrayal. I've always had too much respect for authority."

"Yes. I think you have."

"Is that why—But she said I was the one that loved power."

"There's always a certain amount of self-deception involved in telepathy," Jeff said judicially. "She may not have been able to see very deeply into your mind."

There was a silence. The noise from the streets outside had deepened in pitch. Then Bonnar said, "I'm going to her. She shan't send me away again.

"She'll think I've come back because I hope to profit from her. But I'll make her see what's true, that I've come back because I love her. I've always loved her. That's not going to stop.

"She used to be the Green Queen. Somebody important.

I've been weak. I failed her. All right. But to me she'll always be Queen Leaf. Leaf, the green life of the world."

He looked at Jeffery for a moment, smiling. His eyes had begun to glow. Then he hurried out.