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Black magic—or unimaginable super-science?

The Ladder In The Sky



KEITH WOODCOTT

MAN-PUPPET OF THE UNNAMEABLE

The man in black picked up something which had been leaning beside him. A ring perhaps two feet wide . . . yet when the man in black laid it down on the floor it was as large as he was tall.

The light went out. A bluish glow now emanated from the ring, revealing Bryda's face ghastly gray as she leaned forward, and Yarco's also, set and serious, and the conjurer's impassive.

And within the ring, where moments before there had been the bare planks of the floor, a shape that moved, and opened eyes glowing like coals, and spoke.

"What world is this?" the awful voice inquired.

Keith Woodcott's new novel is an epic adventure in cosmic terror and interstellar super-science.

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Cast of Characters

KAZAN

Illiterate child of a line of thieves, he became master of unimaginable powers.

BRYDA

A prince's mistress, she was afraid to stake her own life—and hated the man she used as proxy.

YARCO

Lost on a bet before he was born, there was only one way he could become his own master.

CLARY

She scoffed at tales of devils, which stood her in good stead when they proved true.

SNUTCH

Nobody questioned his talent and intelligence—except for himself.

RURETH

Faced with events that seemed impossible, he kept his head and found that they were real.

?

A shapeless blackness with eyes like embers, its voice like a gale piping in a mountain range.

THE LADDER IN THE SKY

by
KEITH WOODCOTT

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THE LADDER IN THE SKY

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Also by Keith Woodcott:

. I SPEAK FOR EARTH (D-497)

THE DARKNESS BEFORE TOMORROW

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I

TO THE HAUGHTY, speeding by with their hands heavy with rings and their heavily made-up women at their sides, the Dyasthala was a barely noticed interlude between the spaceport and the high-built modern quarter climbing up the green-fledged hills. By day the beams of the harsh sun slanted down into it, picking at the crumbled walls, the heaps of refuse, the cracked and mud-smeared paving, like the fingers of an idiot scratching his sores. Then the boldest of them sometimes ventured down the broadest of the alleys, escorted by a pack of bullies and followed by yelling beggar-children, and then went home and washed away the clinging odor in a tub of perfumed water, so that they could boast about it later. But never at night. In the Berak tongue, Dyasthala meant "a place to walk warily"—and it was.

Kazan knew that. He had lived all his eighteen years in the Dyasthala, and even now, tonight, he was afraid against his will as he picked his way down alleys not far from the overpass carrying the highway. There was no moon to spy lurkers in shadow tonight, and the darkness was so thick it seemed to oppress his ears as well as his eyes, numbing them. He had eaten nothing since yesterday, but if he had had two coppers to rub together he would have spent them on a flaring, resinous torch even before the bowl of broth and the hunk of bread he kept imagining.

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Cautious, keeping an even distance from the walls on either side, he moved almost as silently as a ghost. But not quite.

Later, he told himself that being hungry must have made him lightheaded, for otherwise he would never have gone walking alone at midnight. But for the first few instants after he was set upon, he thought nothing at all, because his attacker, whoever he was, went first for his throat, and with expert fingers strangled him to momentary unconsciousness.

Indeed, it was so cleverly done that it was like a showman's trick, like the lowering and raising of the curtain before a stage to hide the mechanics of an illusion. One moment he was automatically clawing at the hands about his throat, trying to force a cry past their choking grip; the next he knew, he was sprawled on the ground, gazing up into the yellow glare of a handlight, his hands cuffed and his ankles hobbled.

His throat hurt abominably. Anyway, he could think of nothing to say. He kept silent.

Standing over him, holding the handlight, was a stout man of middle age with a melancholy expression. He wore an old, but once very expensive robe, the hem soiled with mud. He studied Kazan thoughtfully for a long moment.

At last he said, "Get him on his feet."

Kazan felt himself seized by his collar and his belt, and hoisted to a vertical position as impersonally as a tent pole being set up. With his ankles hobbled as they were, he had to give up any idea of trying to run.

As he swung through the air, he caught a glimpse of the man who had actually attacked him. He was a brawny bully with a battered metal helmet on his shaven skull and a power-gun thrust in his belt. Kazan's heart gave a lurch. Whose hands had he fallen into, in the name of the wyrds? In the Dyasthala you didn't show a power-gun—not unless you were the law and there were ten of you marching together in broad daylight. A power-gun was a fortune you could hold in one hand, and nine out of ten of the people of the Dyasthala would kill you to take it away.

The stout man raised the handlight to the level of his shoulder and looked Kazan up and down. Kazan topped the

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bully by half a head, but the bully matched Kazan in height and was much heavier. If you lived in the Dyasthala you stayed thin; in all his life Kazan had had so few square meals he could practically recall them individually. He was lean, like a predator in a country of little game; his eyes and teeth were sharp like a predator's, and his fair hair was chopped crudely short so that in a fight his adversary could not get a hold on it. His shirt he had stolen from a clothman on the other side of the overpass, but since to wear a new garment in the Dyasthala was to invite its theft he had smeared it with dust and torn one of the sleeves off. His jeans of supple leather had come from a man dying in a doorway. He also possessed a belt, hose and boots which he was wearing.

"What's your name?" the stout man said.

Kazan didn't answer. The bully slapped him on the side of the head—not too hard, just by way of encouragement. But the stout man scowled.

"Hego!" he snapped. "Let him make up his own mind!"

The bully chuckled as if at some unknown joke, but let his hand fall. Again the stout man put his question.

"Kazan," came the reluctant answer.

"Just Kazan? Son of—?"

"Just Kazan." His throat was very painful. He tried not to have to swallow, but he was shaking from head to foot with ill-defined terror, and sourness kept rising in his mouth.

"How old are you or don't you know?" the stout man went on.

"About eighteen, I guess," Kazan muttered. He had come to a tentative conclusion about the stout man's interest in him, and if he was right then co-operation would probably be worth a warm bed and a couple of square meals, and perhaps some cash afterwards. You didn't learn to be squeamish in the Dyasthala; you took what came along, or you died.

"All right, he'll do," the stout man said abruptly. "Hego, get him moving."

A jab in the small of the back which almost put him back on the ground sent Kazan stumbling down the alley in the wake of the yellow handlight.

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The new lords of Berak had laid the overpass ruler-straight across the slums, a roadway resting on a twelve-foot wall. If houses got in the way, they knocked them down. On one side of this barrier things had become worse and worse, even in Kazan's lifetime. On the other side, the one closer to the spaceport, the spacecrew and tourist trade had brought a hesitant advance of prosperity.

By day there were guards at the four tunnels piercing the wall, and by night heavy steel grills were locked over the entrances, connected to noisy alarms. Someone like Kazan, with neither documents nor a job to guarantee him, could only reach the far side by scurrying illegally across the overpass and running the risk of being scythed down by the traffic. He had done that, of course. There was nothing in the Dyasthala worth stealing.

But the stout man had a key to one of the steel grills, and they passed under the road without challenge, hearing the transmitted vibration of the late-night vehicles echo eerily about them. Once they were through, Kazan concentrated on memorizing the route they were taking, in case he was abandoned on this side. The streets were still alley-broad, except where houses had collapsed and the ruins had been swept away instead of being repaired, but there was some lighting and the paving was in good repair.

They headed in the direction of the spaceport, meeting almost no one, although they passed several taverns from which singing and laughter could be heard. At last they turned off into a pitch-dark courtyard where the stout man had to use his handlight again, and halted before the door of a house whose windows showed no light at all.

The stout man knocked; the bully Hego closed one large hand on Kazan's upper arm as though suspecting he might miraculously break his hobble and flee.

Shortly the door creaked fractionally open, and a whisper came from the darkness inside.

"Yarco?"

"Are you expecting anyone else?" the stout man said humorously, also in a whisper.

"Fool!" the speaker at the door hissed. "Come in quickly!"

The door opened fully. There was a high step in front of

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it; Kazan almost fell because his hobble prevented him from mounting it, but Hego steadied him and pushed him inside. The door shut.

Like most houses Kazan knew, the ground floor of this one was open from wall to wall. The ceiling was supported on square pillars, the bases of which were low, padded plinths serving as seats. On one of these plinths a man sat, dressed in black, with a small black skullcap above his very pale face. There was no one else present except the person who had opened the door to them. As he was pushed inside, Kazan had seen by Yarco's handlight that this person was wrapped in a ground-length cloak with a concealing hood.

"Sit him down," a sharp voice said.

A woman's voice? Kazan snapped his head round.

The cloak was gone, tossed aside; the unsexed whisper had given place to a rich voice with a ring of authority, and she was beautiful. She was between the stout man and Kazan in height and moved with the grace of a wild animal. Her hair was long and black, her face oval but slightly hollow-cheeked so that her cheekbones seemed to be underlining her bright, fierce-burning eyes. Her mouth was finely shaped and showed red even in the dimness. She wore a smock-dress such as any servant might wear, but she carried it like a princess's gown.

Kazan found himself gaping. But he had no chance to speak; he was thrust towards a seat and firmly settled on it by Hego, who took up a position beside him, watchful.

"Put the light on him, Yarcol!" the woman said. "You—conjurer! Will he do?"

The man in black shrugged, studying Kazan. "Who is he?"

"He's named Kazan." The stout man answered off-handedly. "Aged eighteen or so. I picked him up in the Dyasthala."

"Does he yet know why?"

"What difference does it make?" the woman cut in. "In the Dyasthala there's no one but cutthroats and thieves."

"Still, perhaps he should be asked if he will accept his task," the man in black said.

"Ohhh!" For a moment Kazan thought she was going to

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refuse point-blank; then, however, she turned to face him, lifting her hand to her breast.

"Do you know me?" she said.

Kazan shook his head.

"I'm the Lady Bryda. At least you've heard of me!"

That—yes! Kazan was taken aback, but he controlled his face. He gave a cautious nod. From her disgusted expression he thought that she had probably expected him to make some obeisance, but that was another thing people of the Dyasthala never learned.

Richly sarcastic, she went on, "And has it also come to your notice that this country of Berak is ruled by foreigners? That the rightful governor, Prince Luth, is held a captive?"

Kazan returned her gaze boldly. He said, "I have heard so, but in the Dyasthala it has made little difference. We are treated the same as before."

He thought for a moment she was going to hit him in the face, but the dry voice of the man in black cut in.

"He shows spirit," he said. "That's good."

Bryda relaxed a little, breathing hard. A look that might have been a sneer on a less noble countenance came and went. She said, "Well then, you've been brought here to aid the prince if it can be done. If you're willing, it will mean for you release from the Dyasthala and chances of advancement that you've never dreamed of."

"In the Dyasthala," Kazan said stonily, "you don't dream."

Bryda stamped her foot and turned away. "I thought it would be useless to speak to the blockhead," she said. "I'll have no more time wasted. Conjuror, get to it!"

The man in black shrugged and picked up something which had been leaning against the plinth beside him. A ring, Kazan saw, perhaps two feet wide. No, much wider or else in some cunning way made to expand, for when the man in black laid it down on the floor it was as large as he was tall.

He settled it flat and returned to his seat. "Darkness," he said in a bored tone.

Yarco put out the handlight. A curious noise came to Kazan's ears; after a moment he identified it as the chattering of Hego's teeth. He was distracted from his own

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strange plight for a moment by amusement at Hego's, so that he could not tell whether the conjurer had done anything or whether the thing had happened by itself.

But a bluish glow now emanated from the ring on the floor, revealing Bryda's face ghastly gray as she leaned forward, and Yarco's also, set and serious, and the conjurer's impassive.

And within the ring, where moments before there had been the bare planks of the floor, a shape that moved, and opened eyes glowing like coals, *spoke*.

II

HEGO'S SELF-CONTROL broke. He gave a low shuddering moan, and could be heard to shuffle his feet backwards on the floor. Only his intense determination not to show such weakness prevented Kazan from doing the same, but he had to clench his teeth together so tightly that his jaw muscles ached. The rigid cuffs linking his wrists prevented him clasping his hands. He could only drive his nails hard into his palms.

He had thought he knew darkness. But the thing which had appeared in the circle of blue light was *absolutely* black except for the ember glow of the eyes—if they were eyes; they had neither iris nor pupil, and only the way they turned this way and that suggested that the thing looked out of them. Kazan stared at them greedily. To look anywhere else on that black form was to feel that the soul within him was being sucked out by the totality of the darkness, like air pouring into the vacuum of space.

The voice that came from the blackness was vast and sighing with an overtone of agony, like a gale piping on mountains, a noise that made Kazan shiver and shiver and

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shiver. At its sound, even Bryda flinched back, although the conjurer sat calm on his cushions.

"What world is this?" the awful voice inquired.

The conjurer, as though prepared for the question, reeled off something Kazan could not follow; he assumed it to be a charm and hoped it was a very strong one. He had never before seen a spirit evoked; although the Dyasthala was full of cheating witches and wizards who played on the superstition of wealthy customers, he knew how most of their tricks were worked and took the rest to be trickery also. But not this.

He felt ice cold, and yet sweat was trickling into his eyes.

"And what do you want with me?" the thing said then.

The conjurer looked at Bryda and indicated that she should speak. Uncertain, she licked her lips. The first time she tried to address the thing, her voice was a whisper; she broke off, swallowed hard and swelled her shapely bosom with a deep breath.

"I am the Lady Bryda," she said. "Until four years ago my-lover-Prince Luth was ruler of this land of Berak. Foreigners in league with the traders from space had taken the land over piecemeal; at last they grew so bold they dethroned the prince and set up a usurping government. They did not dare to kill the prince outright, but they hold him captive."

Kazan was beginning to make sense, if not of the thing in the circle, at least of Bryda's motives. But where did he come into her plan? He did not want to think of that.

"If he could be freed," Bryda said, "the people would rise and restore him to power."

For all its inhuman quality, Kazan thought that the thing's voice matched well with its master's faintly bored expression when it spoke again. It said, "Did the people desire his return so strongly, they would have released him."

Kazan reflected that this business was of small interest to the people of the Dyasthala. Who governed them mattered little; what counted was that they were always governed, never governors. Hence they were opposed to Prince Luth, or anyone else, and would not lift a finger to aid him.

"Many attempts have been made," Bryda said in a sub-

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dued tone. "But understand: he is held in a fortress in the middle of a mile-wide lake of sour water, where savage carnivorous monsters dwell. A small boat cannot cross the lake; its crew would be spilled into the water by these creatures, and devoured. We have no way of getting a great boat to the lake, and in any case there are two heavily armed boats that patrol the lake continually, as well as the armed ferry which links the fortress and the mainland. We have considered tunneling, but the lake is too deep; we have considered flying, but there is no place to set down. The fortress completely covers the rocky island on which it is built, and there are rocket stands on the roofs. Yet we can see him at the open window of his apartment, and signal to him."

"And you wish him to be released," the thing said.

"Yes," Bryda said.

"It can be done," the thing sent on, as though ignoring her. "It can be done at once."

Bryda did not relax. She looked at Yarco, who sat with his face shiny with sweat and his lips pressed close together. Not turning to the thing again, she said in a barely audible voice, "For what price?"

"There is only one price," the thing said. "Service for a year and a day."

What could that terrifying voice mean by *service*? What could a black thing with eyes like coals want of a human being? Kazan's blood thundered in his ears, and forgetful of his hobble he tried to get to his feet.

"He will serve you," he heard Bryda say, and knew she was pointing towards him. Somehow, though, he could see nothing. Except a swimming pattern of dots which seemed to be inside his eyes. He felt himself seized and held, most likely by Hego, because the hands that closed on his arms were slippery—wet with the sweat of pure fear.

"It's gone," Yarco said wonderingly.

Then the conjurer's voice, "I must pass the ring over him. Free him, you!"

For a moment the grip on his arms ended. Something cold touched his nape—metal. The ring! He tried frantically to duck underneath it and escape, but it was let fall. He

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flung out his arms, but it was too wide to catch, and like the knell of doom he heard it clang as it struck the floor at his feet.

Then he fainted.

He was lying on his back, his mouth slackly open. A taste of something warm and sweet invited him to swallow, and he did. Passive, he let the fluid run down his throat.

Memory seemed to trickle back with it. When the flow ended he opened his eyes. He was on a padded couch against the wall of the same room. A wheeled trolley stood next to the couch, with a steaming tureen on it. Yarco was ladling the contents into a spouted jug. It was that spout which had come between his teeth, Kazan decided.

Yarco's hand was shaking so badly that the ladle clinked against the jug each time he lifted it, and his face was as shiny as it had been when the thing was present. But he went on methodically with what he was doing.

"I suppose the others were afraid," Kazan said. He licked his lips.

Startled, Yarco almost dropped both jug and ladle. He said, "I—yes, I guess they are."

"And you?"

"I don't believe in being afraid," Yarco said. "We are at the mercy of the stars. If I am to be killed by a man possessed of a devil, it's the decree of the wyrd and I can't change it. Meantime, possessed or not, you seemed to have fainted with hunger. Do you want more of this?"

Kazan sat up, wondering at the calmness in his mind. He took the full jug from Yarco and drained it. Yarco stood watching, his face relaxing from tension to puzzlement.

He said at last, "You're all right?"

Kazan nodded. He stretched his arms out and flexed them. "Did you take off my manacles?" he asked.

"I did. For the same reason. Moreover, the thing which was called up seemed powerful, and you were pledged to it, and it would be well to attend to your needs." He hesitated, and then put the question that had clearly been itching in his mind.

"Do I speak to Kazan, or to the *thing*?"

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For a moment Kazan was startled. Then the words made sense, and he realized that he might have asked the same of himself.

"How can I answer?" he said. "I feel like Kazan, I think—no, I think I think like Kazan."

Abruptly he leaped from the couch. He took a pace away from it and planted his feet together on the floor. His face went pale as death, and he began to shake from head to foot.

"For the love of life!" he forced between his teeth. "What have you done to me? *What have you done to me?*"

Accusing, his eyes sought Yarco's. The stout man met his gaze unflinchingly, and after a moment gave a sorrowful shake of the head.

Behind Kazan there were footsteps on the stairs leading from the upper story. Not changing the direction of his gaze, Yarco said, "He has not harmed me. Nor will he. You may come here."

It was Bryda. Her face showed the ravages of tiredness when she moved into Kazan's field of view, but her eyes were keen and searched his face eagerly.

Under her breath she said, "To think that this—this ragged wretch will be his salvation and mine." And then more sharply to Yarco, "What's to be done? Have you learned yet?"

"Did the conjurer say nothing?" Yarco countered, sounding puzzled.

"No! He said that the—the devil, if it was a devil, had entered into *him* and would know what needed to be done." A flash of dark suspicion crossed her face. "If he should try to trick us—!"

"What will you do?" Yarco broke in. "He's powerful—not one of these rune-casters and gibberers. I have not seen a devil before," he added in a lower tone.

Bryda shot out her hand and swung the unresisting Kazan to face her. She said, "What's to be done? How do we rescue the prince?"

Eyes haunted, Kazan returned her gaze. The unnatural calm which he had felt on waking from his faint was gradually returning. Yet in a detached way he was still fright-

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ened. To himself, the strange episode of the thing in the circle felt like a nightmare—unreal, and over now. But this was impossible, for here Yarco and the Lady Bryda were speaking of it as a reality.

"If you don't speak," Bryda spat at him, "I'll send for Hego and make him beat you till you do!"

"Hego won't come," Yarco said. "It will be days before he can recover his wits."

Bryda, a prince's mistress, waiting for his word. His! Kazan's. Who spoke of devils? Were a man to be filled with a devil, he would know it for sure! And here he was, himself, thinking like himself, talking like himself—Kazan, the waif of the Dyasthala, self-taught thief, hungry, despised. With the calm, a cunning thought was entering his mind. Why not, for a while at least, make the pretense? Why not make Bryda for all her rank and airs squirm on his hook? He turned the idea over, as it were to taste it, and it tasted as sweet as honey.

He gave a little crooked smile. He said, "Of course I know what must be done. But I'm a ragged wretch, Lady Bryda. I'm a starving wretch, too. You get nothing without paying for it, Lady Bryda, not unless you're a thief like me. You've tried it, and you've failed. You've got to pay. You don't like it, do you? But that's the risk you run if you take without asking."

He threw his hand out in front of him, palm up, not in the beggar's gesture, but as a merchant would wait for payment.

III

HATE HIM she might—*did*, Kazan corrected himself smugly—but pay him she must, until the day she found out how she was being fooled. And the payment he was taking was not small.

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For the moment he was alone. He could let himself enjoy it. From sheer jubilation he jumped in the air and spun round through half a circle to land without a sound on the soft warm floor.

By the wyrd, though Bryda could complain of this house as a place of misery and squalor, for him it was luxury unimaginable. Space! Thirty feet on a side, the room, and the ceiling so high he could not touch it if he jumped straight up; light always on call—not as it was in the few houses in the Dyasthala where there was a supply, an unreliable glimmer, but a steady brilliant glow; warmth unceasing and color. Almost, the color mattered more than anything; the greenness of the walls, the rich tan of the floor, the sunlight-yellow above.

There was a bowl of fruit on a low table. He snatched some and crammed it in his mouth, and washed it down with a swig of iced wine from the cup beside the bowl. Licking his lips, he took stance before the man-high mirror on the wall and stared at himself.

Even now, a disbelieving expression came to his face. The black shirt with the silver piping and the plain black pants, the low shoes, were things he would never have dared to steal for himself—only if he were sure of selling them, perhaps to a spaceman who would leave the planet before questions could be asked. It wasn't only their rich appearance; it was their thermostatically controlled circuitry.

His hair had been barbered by a slight, quiet girl who attended to Bryda's and Yarco's hair as well, and was brilliant as new silver. The edge had not been taken off his leanness. Indeed, the strange battle of wits of the past twenty days seemed to have sharpened it. But the pure animal hunger was gone from his appearance.

Now the only question was: how long would it last?

Vaguely at the back of his mind, when he began this, there had been the idea of making Bryda submit to the ultimate humiliation and lie with him. That possibility had vanished. Already only a hairline separated her suspicion from the certainty that he was deceiving her and Yarco and the other, rather shadowy figures who came and went at this house, usually by night, on business probably connected

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with the escape of Prince Luth. Now it had become a delicate problem of balance, of postponing the inevitable moment when he himself fled by teasing out her hope that he would work the promised miracle.

Twice now she had threatened a showdown. The second time had been only yesterday. An inspiration had saved him. He had insisted on being taken out to look at the fortress in the lake where Prince Luth was imprisoned. She could not turn down such a sensible request, but she hadn't like her bluff being called.

That lake . . . The self-approving grin disappeared from Kazan's face. They had taken him up in the late afternoon to a high hill overlooking it, a mile from its shore, and given him powerful glasses to study it and the fortress. They had pointed out the main window of Prince Luth's suite, and the sheer sixty-foot drop from it to the water. But he had not wasted much time looking at the fortress. Prince Luth, for all Kazan cared, could stay there till he rotted.

He'd stared at the lake instead.

He hadn't known that such things existed in Berak. All he had ever seen of Berak, after all, was the Dyasthala. He was vaguely aware of a world outside, but it never mattered to him. The trip out to the lake—a twenty-mile journey—was the farthest he had ever been from the spot where he was born. And he was uncomfortable when there were no buildings anywhere in view, as happened for part of the time. Even the fortress, though it was gray and forbidding, was comforting when he tore his hypnotized gaze away from the water.

There were things swarming there. Twice he caught sight of slime-dripping, ropy tentacles that cracked out across the mirror surface like vast whips; once he saw the back of a monstrous, glistening, brown creature rise into view and spit blood reeking to the sky before something still more huge and very hungry cut it in two with a beak like giants' scissors. After that there was blood on the water, like an oil slick.

And a horde of little creatures came to feed on that.

"There," Bryda had promised, throwing out her arm in a

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regal gesture, "is where I shall have you thrown if you do not keep your promise."

If he had had the slightest hope that she was voicing an empty threat, Kazan would have reminded her that he had promised nothing, that the conjurer had made the promises, and that he, Kazan, was merely a victim snatched at random off the streets to meet the price that the devil demanded. And that, if she wanted satisfaction, she would do better to go in search of the conjurer again.

But she meant what she said. It couldn't be doubted.

Kazan frowned at himself in the mirror. *Was* that devil real? Was it a devil? Had it all been a superbly clever trick by the man in black to part Bryda from her money? He would have been well paid, that was sure.

Because it was the likeliest explanation, and because he felt no different from the way he remembered feeling before, Kazan had accepted it as the truth and tried not to question it further. Seeing the monsters in the lake yesterday, though, had put him vividly in mind of the thing in the blue-lit circle, and he wasn't certain any longer.

Abruptly the dangerous nature of the game he was playing hit him, full force. He stood for a moment, calming himself, but seeing the way his eyes widened and the tendons stood out on his neck.

That couldn't be faced alone. He had to go somewhere. He had to get out, maybe. He had to go back to the Dyasthala and lose himself. At the back of his mind was the faint, unformulated idea that perhaps when it came to claim its year and a day of service the devil would fail to find him.

In the grip of something like panic, he slammed out of the room and went clattering down the stairs.

Halfway, he stopped dead, grasping the baluster. He had believed himself alone in the house; even Hego, who was his constant guard by night and day, would be outside the only door in preference to staying under the same roof as a man possessed of a devil.

But there, sitting comfortably on the padded plinth of one of the square pillars, was Yarco. He had a jug of wine beside him, and he was turning the pages of a large book on his lap.

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He glanced up, nodded to Kazan, and went back to his reading.

That was a piece of bad luck, Kazan thought. Yet provided Yarco was on his own, not irremediable. He slowly descended the rest of the stairs, as though he had left his room out of mere restlessness, and began to wander about, eyeing the pictures, the racked books and recording crystals, the slow changing lines of words on the news machine.

Passing the window set in the front wall, he caught a glimpse of Hego standing stolidly before the door. Some small boys were going by in a group; they seemed to be shouting at him, because he turned thunder-faced and shook his fist. But no sound from outside ever entered the house if the door was closed.

He wandered on. Rounding the pillar at whose base Yarco sat, he looked down at the book he was reading. Reading. Well, the guy seemed contented enough, and maybe when a man got to Yarco's state, podgily middle-aged, and the fire in his belly started to die down, it was a way of passing the time. He craned his neck. There was a picture at the top of the page on the left, and he couldn't quite get the angle right for the depth effect from where he was standing.

"Can you read, Kazan?" Yarco said.

Kazan started. He hadn't noticed Yarco turn his head. Now he'd got his attention, and it would take a while to lose it again. Cursing his thoughtlessness, he said, "Why—a bit. I can read street names, and names on stores, and like that."

"Not much call for more than that, I guess," Yarco nodded. "You write your name?"

Uncomfortable, Kazan shook his head.

"You should learn," Yarco said. He put his book aside and helped himself to wine from the jug. "You can't go back into the Dyasthala the way you are now, and you won't get by outside without it. When do you work your miracle, by the way?"

"Miracle?" Kazan said slowly, studying Yarco's bland face.

"Yes. You know!" Yarco waved a negligent hand. "Your vanishing act."

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There was a moment of frozen silence. "I don't know what you mean," Kazan said at last.

"You know only too well," Yarco corrected him. He got up and replaced his book in the rack on the far wall. Swinging back towards Kazan, he could be seen to be smiling.

"Oh, don't worry," he said. "I'm not going to interfere. As I told you when we first met, I believe we're at the mercy of the stars. If the wyrds decreed that you should become possessed of a devil, what can a mere man like myself do about it? Or you, for that matter! Of course, that may not be your fate. Perhaps you're due to wind up in the sour lake, eaten by savage animals. Perhaps you're due to disappear into the Dyasthala, to be garroted for your fine new clothes and dumped in a sewer, to end as an anonymous corpse. I hope not. You're a very astute young man, and I'm sure you're going to go far. If you live, that is."

A cold chill walked down Kazan's spine like an animal with feet of ice. He said, "I—no! What's your loyalty to Bryda?"

A shadow crossed Yarco's face. He said shortly, "None."

"Then what are you doing in this?" Kazan snapped.

"All right, I'll tell you," Yarco said after a second of hesitation. "I was lost on a bet to the prince's father a month before I was born. I have been the property of the royal family all my fifty years of life. I have never been able to lift a hand to serve myself. That is, I never could until Prince Luth was kidnaped and made captive. So I'm in no great hurry myself to let him free. But my experience of a lifetime has convinced me—oh, foolishly perhaps, but thoroughly—that it's no good railing against one's fate."

"So in one sense at least, you too are possessed," Kazan said. He gave a harsh laugh.

"Too?" Yarco picked the word up like a hungry scavenger pouncing on a scrap of food. "Do you mean—?"

It was clear what he would have said, "Do you mean that you are truly possessed by that thing—whatever it was?" And to that Kazan still had no answer. For, after all, he had no information to guide him. What should a possessed man feel like?

But at that moment the entrance door was flung open,

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Hego appearing momentarily beyond it and then stepping back to make way for Bryda at the head of a small procession of men in dark clothes and outdoor boots. The one directly following Bryda was known by sight to Kazan, but not by name; he had visited the house twice at night, and Kazan had been produced for his inspection.

It was the man behind, however, who strode into the center of the room on entering and stared Kazan up and down. Meantime, his companions formed a close group just inside the door, their expressions dour and threatening.

He carried a short cane with jeweled ends, which he tapped on the palm of his hand while he was scrutinizing Kazan. When he was through for the moment, he glanced at Bryda, poking Kazan in the chest with the cane.

"Him?" he said in a disgusted tone.

"Not him precisely," Bryda snapped. "The devil which possesses him."

"I've heard too much of this devil nonsense," the man growled. "I want to hear—now!—what he proposes to do to help us, and if it doesn't make sense, he goes quietly tonight into a lonely grave. And there'll be a reckoning later. Is that understood?" He glared at Bryda.

"And you?" he went on after a moment, prodding Kazan again. "Do you understand it? Do you want to save your skin?"

One moment before he uttered an unconvincing lie, Kazan hesitated. Something had occurred to him, something he had not expected. A good and sensible reason for having delayed.

He said, "If I'd talked about what was going to be done, how many people in Berak do you think would know about it by now? And what do you think would be stupider than to try a rescue on a night when there's a moon?"

A sardonic twist of the lip went with the words, as unexpected and as unfamiliar as they had been—and as effective. Uncertainly, his challenger drew back half a pace. He said after a moment, "I'll accept that. But what's to be done?"

Kazan didn't answer. He felt his mouth open a little. He stared unseeing and disbelieving past the man before him

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and towards Yarco, on whose face a look of astonishment was dawning.

Because he knew. He did know after all. And he didn't see how it was possible.

IV

NIGHT LAY over the fortress and the lake. The sky was as clear as crystal, and every now and again Kazan found himself glancing up at it, noting that the stars were organized in groups, noting that they cycled slowly, diagonally towards the horizon, so that there were now different stars behind the fortress from those that had been showing when the sun set.

He had never seen a night like this. He had never looked at the stars except from beneath the constant haze of the city. Up on the hill, around the homes of the haughty, the sky might be as clear as it was here. But not over the Dyasthala, from which the fumes of a thousand coarse fires and the reek of decaying rubbish oozed forever upward, a miasma fit to foul even the stars.

He had not yet made up his mind whether he liked the sky to be so naked over the world. But it was a new thing, and very interesting.

Out there in the louring bulk of the fortress a few lights gleamed; one in particular, directly facing them, was the window of Prince Luth's apartment. Almost anything might be going on there. It was too far to hear, and too dark to see.

But the night was not silent by any means. Something fearful was hunting in the lake; you could track it by the succession of splashes and howls that marked its victims' deaths. And to the right and left of the fortress other beasts, perhaps mating, frequently uttered a rasping hoot that rose to an ear-splitting whistle before its end.

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Kazan was aware of a curious detachment from himself, although when he had to act or give orders he did not feel that it was something else in him working through him. Rather, the sensation each time it happened was like being struck by a transparently obvious, but brilliant, notion. He thought now that he ought to be afraid of it, but it was too enjoyable.

He had never had such subtle thoughts about himself before. Now, reclining in comfort, overlooking the lake and waiting for the moment which was sure to come, he was able to recognize that if the problem had been put to him to consider as happening to somebody else, he would have expected to be scared and worried and looking for an escape. Instead, he was full of buoyant confidence. Maybe he'd caught some of Yarco's fatalism.

Apparently from nowhere, Yarco's voice came softly to him. The stout man was sitting just beyond arm's reach, shrouded in one of the light, portable radiation deflectors that concealed all the watchers round the lake from the suspicious fortress guards.

"How do you feel, Kazan?"

"Confused," Kazan said. "But otherwise well."

"I've noticed," Yarco said, and after a moment's pause went on. "You're enjoying yourself. You've tasted power for the first time. Don't get the habit."

Kazan turned the idea over. Yarco was probably right. Since the moment when the stout man had shown his exact understanding of what passed in Kazan's mind, Kazan had had the healthiest respect for him. Almost, he had begun to like him. After all, to have been pledged before birth to the whims of the royal family was in its way a fate like being born into the Dyasthala, with so little hope of ever climbing out.

"You puzzle me," Yarco said. "I know quite well that you have not the slightest idea of what you're doing, that Prince Luth is nothing to you, nor is Lady Bryda, that your world yesterday was the Dyasthala and today still is. And yet, something moves you. Like an invisible hand. Have you ever believed in devils, Kazan?"

There was a note of mockery in the voice. It wasn't quite

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sincere, as though he were pretending to laugh at what he was speaking of for fear that he might otherwise scream. Kazan said shortly, "All I've ever believed in is hunger. And cold. And disease. And the inevitability of death."

"Have you added to the list lately?" Yarco pressed him.

"I guess not," Kazan said stonily. He glanced down towards the lakeside, and stiffened, everything else forgotten. There went the first stage of his plan.

His?

He choked the thought back, concentrating on the details of what must be happening. Lately, they told him, Prince Luth's captors had decided that there was now small chance of his followers trying to rescue him, and reduced their guards somewhat, so that the lakeside patrol now consisted of a mere four men—or rather, twenty in all. But at any time only four were actually patrolling; the remainder were in four watch-houses. Four men would search their quarter of the shore, then relieve the men in the watch-house they came to and send them off in turn.

Then, Kazan had said, send four men down a few minutes before the patrol is expected. Let them go to the watch-house as though they were the patrol, overcome the men inside, and then overcome the real patrol when it arrived. Let them make any necessary report by phone to the next watch-house, and it would be an hour or so before suspicions were aroused.

He waited tensely. From here he should be able to catch any slight sounds of scuffling. Yes, and there was something which fell dry upon the ear—feet on solid earth, not the noise of a thing out in the lake.

"Hear that?" he whispered to Yarco.

"I hear nothing," Yarco returned curtly.

A few minutes later, the shadows slipped down the hillside to where he was waiting. One of them, he thought, was Bryda, but it was hard to tell, for they were all draped in the necessary radiation deflectors.

"It's done," a harsh whisper informed him. "Move now!"

Kazan chuckled and rose lazily to his feet. The cream of the jest, he thought, was that none of them knew what he was going to do. And the cream of the cream—which

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Yarco, he thought, might suspect—was that he knew no more than they did. He was merely utterly confident that he would know.

He walked down to the edge of the water and looked about him. The pallid gray beach was partly mud, partly rock, partly sand; where he had come was sandy. A dozen paces distant something cast up out of the sluggish waves squirmed and writhed. Even in the darkness it seemed incomplete—a torn-off limb continuing to move blindly by itself.

The others who had come down clustered around him, impatient but not daring to cross Kazan. He savored the sensation for a moment. Then he went to the very edge of the water and bent down, feeling in the air. It did not seem that he was doing anything else.

At a level slightly higher, he did the same. And then a foot higher still.

He turned and walked back to the others, leaving nothing behind that could be seen. With ironical grace he bowed to the shape of darkness that he took to be Bryda.

"Will it please the Lady Bryda to come with me?" he said.

She hesitated. After a moment he put his hand out and seized hers, drawing her down after him to the same spot on the beach where he had been a moment ago.

"There!" he said. "There, in front of you! The window of Prince Luth's apartment! Are you not going to it?"

Alarmed that he spoke aloud, the others hurried forward. Just before they came up with him, he seemed to lose patience. Catching Bryda around the waist, he whirled her off her feet into mid-air.

And stood her there.

Time hesitated for a moment. A little murmur of disbelief welled from the people on the beach. As for Bryda, she swayed, standing on the air, and gave a soft moan. But in a few seconds she had recovered herself.

"Will it go so all the way?" she said. Her voice shook.

"Of course," Kazan said.

"It's a miracle," someone said flatly. "I don't like it at all."

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"A serviceable miracle is better than nothing," someone else cut in. "I'll pray only that I keep my footing."

"None of you need go," Kazan said. "None but myself, and the lady here. One to guide the prince, one to be an earnest that this is no deceit."

"And I," another voice spoke up, "I, Yarco. The prince will expect me."

"I beg to differ," Kazan said. "He will expect no one."

"He will expect it *of* me, then," Yarco said, sounding unruffled. He picked his way to the edge of the water and felt about him for the invisible steps. For a moment he shook his head in wonderment. Then he climbed up beside Bryda and bounced up and down on the balls of his feet, wheezing a little.

"What is your causeway made of, Kazan?" he said.

"Air," Kazan said. He knew it was so, but only in the moment after Yarco had spoken. For an instant his confidence wavered. To walk on air, over this dreadful lake, when mouths snapped almost at their feet? And then, why not? He could do this, and he would do it.

He leaped on the first of his steps, the second, and the third, and began to build his arch of air out across the menacing water.

Once—they must have been over the point where the lake-bed shelved—a lashing tentacle swept up at them, passing so close that it sprayed them with the tacky slime it used to cling to its prey. Bryda cried out; Yarco said something brisk and reassuring, and Kazan built higher. After that, they were well beyond the reach of anything in the lake.

The sheer splendor of what he was doing then took possession of him. Who would think to look for three unprotected people, walking through the air towards the prince's window? They looked for aircraft; they looked for boats. Indeed, as he came nearer Kazan could see the two armed vessels which by day patrolled the lake, lying at a wharf alongside the fortress wall.

But this they would not look for.

He placed the last few steps carefully, at the right height

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for a man to step on to when he climbed out of the window. As he worked, he could see into the room beyond. It was well lit, but apparently empty. The casement stood open, and hardly a sound could be heard.

For himself, Kazan thought, studying the luxurious fittings the other side of the window, he would be fairly happy in such captivity.

He stood aside and again made a mocking bow to Bryda, who stripped off her radiation deflector and tossed it at him so violently that he almost stepped back off the airy support on which they now all three were poised. But he said nothing, only left her to think for a moment of what she had done.

Then she turned to the window. For this great event she had put on her most gorgeous clothing, aglitter with color now in the light from the window and changing its hue with every movement. The skirt of the gown went from gold through green to purple as she put her legs over the sill of the window and clambered inside.

"Luth!" she said. "Luth!"

A door flung aside. In the opening a tall man stood, wearing a blue suit crusted with gold, his dark hair foppishly waved, a narrow dark moustache laid down over his rather sensual mouth. For a second he stared, not believing his eyes. Then Bryda had flung her arms about him and was babbling of what Kazan had done.

No; of what Bryda had done. As he might well have expected, Kazan reflected in annoyance. But the annoyance did not last. After all, it would become clear to the prince soon enough to whose credit his freedom must be placed. What mattered now was to bring him safe to shore and—
To whose credit?

Like a worm cankering a flower, the nagging doubt began to gnaw at Kazan's mind. Perhaps it was triggered by the look on Yarco's face, visible now by the light from the window, because he had pushed back the hood of his radiation deflector.

Kazan stared down between his feet. He stood on air. They had walked out on air to this window. Down there the evil life of the lake seethed and perhaps yearned up at

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them. Who had the power to make a man walk safe on air? Not Bryda. Not Kazan, who was a thief from the Dyasthala. But a devil speaking in a voice like a bitter gale playing on a mountain for an organ pipe.

At the back of his mind he heard again the dreadful words: "There is only one price. Service for a year and a day."

He began to tremble. When the prince came out to join him on his invisible platform he scarcely noticed the fact. All he wanted was to place his feet again securely on the ground.

V

TO WALK on air was not to the prince's taste. It took him a long moment to decide that he could plant both feet together outside the window, another that he could safely let the window ledge go. Even then, in quick suspicious tones, he ordered Kazan to go ahead of him, and Bryda next. Meekly Yarco fell in behind. Kazan wondered dully whether the prince would trust even Yarco at his back, but seemingly he did.

He went quickly down the steps of air. He knew, in the same unaccountable way he had known how to make them, that they would dissolve in another few minutes. Part of his mind was occupied in trying to recall the trick of them; he had felt—felt? No, it was clearer than thinking, but it was not as clear as remembering. He had been aware of something about the movement of the individual particles of the air and how to organize it in a direction opposed to gravity. But the knowledge was fading. Too much of his mind was busy with his footing, and long before he was back on firm ground it had gone as a dream goes when you try to recall it among the distractions of the daytime.

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There was no one on the shore now. Everyone else had faded back among the rocks and shrubs of the hillside beyond. But once they left the stretch of sand and started to hurry up the slope the night seemed to come softly alive with murmurs of congratulation.

Bryda, darting ahead, led the prince into a little sheltered hollow, the same one where Kazan had earlier issued his instructions. There for a minute or two she spoke with him under her breath; after that, dark-clad men came out of the night and spoke with him also. Only brief phrases were exchanged. Kazan was glad enough to hang back at the side of the hollow, trying not to think of what he had done. He caught some words here and there—names of cities elsewhere in Berak, mention of the transport waiting for the prince, the route to be taken, the hiding-places arranged while the news of his escape was being passed to the royalist underground.

None of this concerned him, Kazan felt. Prince Luth was rightful ruler of Berak, perhaps. But of the Dyasthala, no. If anyone ruled there, it was Death himself. Or the wyrdys of whom Yarco spoke so often, the mystical controllers of human destiny.

Suddenly the night was riven by a shrieking blast overhead, and instinctively everyone ducked for cover. Then, turning their faces to the sky, they saw that it was not an alarm on the fortress which had started them, but a spaceship broaching atmosphere and braking hard as it swooped down on the port.

By tacit consent they waited till the racket died away; then they rose and scattered into the darkness again. "If you'll follow me," Kazan heard someone say deferentially to Prince Luth, and took it for an instruction for himself as well. He got to his feet.

He could just make out Bryda, laying her hand on the prince's arm and turning her pale face in his direction. Some words passed, too low for him to catch; then the prince gave a brusque answer.

"Wait there, fellow," he said, and turned to go.

An intuition of danger pierced Kazan's strange lethargy. He

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took three paces forward to confront Bryda and the prince, and snapped at them.

"Wait here?" he said. "When but for me you'd be waiting yourself, in that prison of yours for a rescue that would never come?"

"Mind whom you talk to!" Bryda hissed. "And remember—you did not offer your service to the prince, as a loyal citizen of Berak should! You were haled off the streets, a thief and a wastrel and you cannot say you've not been paid for what you've done."

"You price the prince low," Kazan retorted. "Some clothing and meals for one man for one month. What says he to that valuation of him?"

"I say you're an insolent fool," the prince gritted between his teeth.

"This insolent fool"—delicately, out of the darkness, the voice of Yarco with an apologetic edge—"has nonetheless been the instrument of the prince's freedom."

"You also are a fool, Yarco," Bryda said, rounding on him. "Did you not see what he did? Did you not walk the steps he made of the air? He's sold to a devil, and we cannot keep him in the prince's company! A man with power like that? The service promised to us is over. Now the service promised to the devil begins. Therefore let the devil look to his own. Hego! Axam! Do it now!"

Something vastly heavy crashed between Kazan's shoulders. His arms were snatched up behind him and manacles were forced over his wrists. A gag so thick and tight it almost choked him was slapped over and into his mouth. He kicked out, but strong arms were clapped around his shins and pinned his legs together. The two bullies were experts at their work; he had already known this of Hego, but the other, Axam, seemed still more practiced and ruthless.

"Let your devil take care of you," Bryda said. It was plain that she meant the words to sound sneering. Somehow, though, she failed, and a tremolo of fear broke through them. For a long moment she hesitated, as though about to say more. Then she caught Prince Luth by the arm and vanished with him over the lip of the hollow, down the hillside to the transport awaiting them.

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Like a layer of ice on the surface of a river beneath which the current still ran strong, a skin of calm overlaid the raging terror in Kazan's mind. Even as they walked him to the beach he was casting about for a chance of tricking them.

But none offered itself.

Each of the bullies had his power-gun in his hand, leveled unwavering at Kazan's back; although his feet were unhobbled it would be suicide to run. He had no wish to be cast as a corpse into the lake, food for the monsters. He had still less wish to be cast alive in the water, which seemed the intention. Yet he felt obscurely certain that to stay alive as long as he could must be his immediate purpose.

"Stop there," Axam said from behind him. Obediently Kazan halted, his feet sinking a little into the loose sand. "Hego! Find the steps he made!"

Out of the corner of his eye Kazan saw Hego take a hesitant pace forward, then change his mind. "It's devil's work," he said finally. "I will not."

"Oh, for—!" Axam said, exasperated. He walked forward to the edge of the water and felt about him for a moment; he found solidity and leaned on it. "All right," he said. "Get him down here."

As though to make up for his moment of reluctance, Hego gave Kazan such a blow in the small of the back that it almost knocked him flying. He barely managed to keep his balance as he stumbled forward.

Could he make more steps? How? Already the knowledge was leaking away! Already it was dreamlike and unreal. And in any case he had known how to shape the steps of air only by making certain movements with his hands, which were manacled behind him.

"Get up there!" Axam snarled, cuffing the side of his head. "Go on!"

How soon would they dissolve, these steps? Kazan felt a rubberiness under the first foot he placed above the water. Could he break into a run, running on nothing all the way to the fortress in the middle of the lake? Sweat was springing out all over his body now. He had expected that some

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new knowledge would come to his mind and save him. He did not want to die!

"Up!" Axam ordered. "Up—quickly!"

Yes, what they proposed to do was clear. Wait until he had climbed well out over the lake, then fire one silent power-blast, and—an open mouth in the water below. No trace. No hope.

The blood seemed to be draining away from Kazan's head, leaving his mind giddy and empty of ideas. He began to climb numbly, his eyes fascinated by the way the black mirror of the water sometimes broke apart in ripples to reveal a hump-backed shape or a whipping tentacle. Someone had mentioned to him—Yarco, perhaps—that these creatures had lived in many places all over this world before the coming of man, and that this had once been the private hunting lake of the royal family.

Glancing back, he thought he saw one of the bullies raising his power-gun. Perhaps it was a flinching in anticipation of the impact that made him slip; perhaps the step on which he had placed his weight a second earlier was failing faster than the rest; the air sagged beneath him and struggled to be more than air and was only air and he was plummeting headlong to the hungry water, thirty feet below.

In the bright, warm room—sealed utterly from the outer world so that no whisper of sound or ray of light might attract a passer-by—Yarco shivered and shivered again. Now and then his teeth escaped his control and chattered aloud.

From his endless succession of consultations with visitors who came through the door with backward glances and scrutinized the prince carefully before making obeisance, as if suspecting deceit, Luth looked up in irritation.

"For the love of life, Yarco!" he snapped. "Will you keep your foolishness to yourself?"

These matters of how strong sentiment is in such a town, what weapons lie in secret armories . . . Yarco flinched and muttered something which did not carry. Proud beside Luth, Bryda tossed back her dark hair.

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"What's the matter, you dodderer?" she said. "Speak up if you've anything to say!"

"I feel you have done something evil and dangerous," Yarco said. "The young Kazan—"

"Enough!" Bryda cut in. "Have you not heard before from Hego how he fell to his death, manacled and helpless among the beasts of the lake? What are you afraid of?"

"He made steps in the air," Yarco said.

"And could not make them to save himself," Bryda retorted. But in her fiery eyes Yarco thought he could detect a lurking, shame-faced fear as great as his own. To cover this, she gestured across the room to where Hego stood, his loose-lipped mouth working a little, his huge hands nervously locking and unlocking with each other.

"I keep thinking of a beak like a giant's scissors," Yarco said. "Strong enough to shear through a steel shackle. I keep thinking of a tentacle that could whip a man through the air like a ball batted in a children's game, to land him bruised and panting in soft mud, but alive. I keep thinking of the hate that a man could bear you for condemning him to such a death. And the power that a black devil could give him to wreak his vengeance."

"If there was that power," Prince Luth said, "the devil would have saved him directly, not by this chain of fantasy you've pictured." But his eyes were shadowed. "Go, he said after a pause. "Your mind is wandering."

Yarco pulled his plump body up from his seat. He gave a formal bow to Luth and started towards the door. On the point of leaving, he turned back.

"It will go badly with this plan," he said. "I can feel how the wyrds are working."

"Get out!" Luth roared, half-rising. The door slammed. He sank back in his place, adding with a sidewise glance at Hego, "And no nonsense from you, either. Hear? The man is dead, a worthless Dyasthala thief!"

He went back to his business of available vehicles, codes, signals for action and means of assembling troops. It was not until near morning that he needed Yarco to answer a question for him and sent Hego up the stairs.

So it was Hego who found the stout man, lying back on

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the bed which Kazan had used during his stay in this house, a look of frozen terror on his face and a tiny vial of poison clasped with death's rigidity in his plump left hand.

VI

UNDER THE gray sky, the gray people stood passively in a line across the expanse of concrete. The line was meant to be straight, but it bowed a little here and there like a resting snake. Or like a parasitic worm, the intellectual lieutenant thought, because the segments of such a worm could separate and start anew when they found something to sink their hooks into, going over to an ecstasy of ovulation. And this wavering line was splitting, dividing at the head, going this way and that into the parallel sets of prefabricated huts erected along the high wire barriers with the one guarded gate—and even sometimes getting through the gate.

It was the weather, he thought. Coloring his mind the same dismal gray as the sky.

So backward! He had walked twice the whole length of the sullen line, fascinated against his will by the dirt and the raggedness. Some of them lacking *limbs*, for the love of life, when a five-day graft and a course of cell-stimulant was all it took to replace even a leg. And sores dressed with foul rags. And teeth missing. It was a miracle that any of them were allowed through the gate at all.

Still, for the mines on Vashti . . . And after all, they were only cargo to him.

He cast a longing glance backward over his shoulder to the ship resting in its cradle like a squat egg, the planetary insignia of his home world glowing luminous on its nearer side. For all the good he was doing here he could be comfortably in his cabin, playing over that tantalizing not-quite-erotic recording by that new anonymous composer, the one

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for whom they had made such extravagant and justified claims. Was it a man or a woman who had—?

He sighed. Surely the job wouldn't take long now. But it was a long time since any of the prospective workers had emerged from the examination huts and turned towards the gate. Almost all of them for the last half-hour or so had gone despondently back towards the city, growing smaller like insects as they walked across the concrete with lowered heads.

Eight hundred, they needed. Surely out of all these thousands it wouldn't take long to find eight hundred—even if they were undernourished miserable wrecks.

"How's it going, Major?" a voice behind him said. He half-turned, seeing a large, prosperous man in a temperature suit of dull green and black, his fingers heavy with rings. By his accent, an upper class native of the area.

"Lieutenant, not Major," he corrected. And went on, "Slowly, I'm afraid."

"So I gather, so I gather," the large man said. "Name's Zethel, by the way. Yes, I believe you can only take eight hundred. We're giving you too many to choose from, isn't that it?" he chuckled.

Not wanting to be impolite to this man who might be locally important, the intellectual lieutenant feigned an interest in a subject that he didn't care the fission of a nucleus about.

"There certainly are a lot of applicants," he agreed. "I wouldn't have thought you'd allow so many of them to leave the planet. Not that we're going to complain. Our mines on Vashti won't be automatized for another ten years or so, and we'll need plenty of human labor till they are. But I'm puzzled."

"First time here?" Zethel said. "And only just arrived?"

"Yes to both. All I knew when we touched down was what we were told from home—that there was mercenary labor available in quantity. So we came at once, of course."

Zethel grunted. "Well, let's be honest—you're doing us a favor taking some of 'em off our hands. You aren't going to have an easy time with some of them, I guess. We had a spot of trouble here recently. Maybe you heard about that?"

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The intellectual lieutenant remembered something vague he had caught on a news channel without really paying attention to. He said, frowning, "Some sort of popular revolt?"

"Not so popular," Zethel said. "The last heir of the old ruling house—this island has been an incredible backwater area clinging with crazy doggedness to out-of-date ideas—anyway, this Prince Luth called a revolt against the government, and caused some small disturbance. Nearly ten thousand people were killed and quite a lot of damage was done. We had to divert space traffic to other continents for a period of about a month. Forlorn hope, of course. He was killed by one of his own followers and the movement fell to pieces. There wasn't any real support for it—just a vague mystical aura that stuck to the prince's name. Why should there be? Nobody in his right mind wanted to go back to the days of autocratic monarchy, even here on Berak."

"And these are the followers of this prince?" the lieutenant hazarded. His voice showed some slight interest at last. It was quite like something out of a historical romance, after all. Hereditary titles—why, even on a backward world like this you'd never have expected it. And the mystical influence of royalty.

"Some of them," Zethel said, shrugging. "The healthy ones. The rest are out of the Dyasthala—that's our thieves' quarter."

King of the Beggars, yet. That was an ancient phrase which had once stuck in the lieutenant's mind. His interest brightened still further. He said, "I guess the mystic aura you mentioned would be strong among people like that."

"No, you'd be wrong," Zethel corrected him. "That's what was so curious. It had always been believed that people in the Dyasthala didn't give a damn about who was at the top of the heap, because they were invariably at the bottom. Nonetheless there was a rumor, far too strong to be ignored, that the prince's escape from the place he was held captive—which is a story in itself, I may say; it's acquired overtones of pure legend in a shorter time than you'd think possible—but as I was saying, there were these rumors that his escape

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had been masterminded by someone from the Dyasthala. Not unreasonable, I suppose. A really skilled professional thief might well be able to steal away a man for once, instead of goods.

"So to teach them a lesson we had the Dyasthala cleared. It was an appalling slum, anyway, and a sink of disease and moral corruption of all kinds. Quite a number of people we managed to hang criminal charges on—theft, mainly, or receiving stolen goods, or debauching children under the age of discretion. Those we put to use ourselves. The rest are out there, mainly. Now that we've cleared the area they used to live in, they haven't anywhere to go, and we're anxious to stop them from sleeping in the streets."

"And did you catch this mysterious personage who—what did you call it?—masterminded the prince's escape?"

"Him? Oh, I doubt whether he really existed," Zethel said. "We had the same more-or-less garbled story from several of the prince's sympathizers, though. Rather puzzling. He's said to have sold himself to an evil being in return for the power to walk on air up to the window of the prince's prison and bring him down again. Then the demon, or devil, or whatever claimed him by throwing him into the lake below. It's colorful, at any rate, isn't it?"

The lieutenant nodded. He was just going to put another question—after all, this would make a story to tell on the trip to Vashti, and when he'd polished the native crudities off it, perhaps even at home during his next furlough—when an orderly came out of the nearest of the examination huts.

"Sergeant presents his compliments, sir," the man said. "Wants a decision from you on a borderline case."

The lieutenant sighed and excused himself. Zethel gave a mechanical smile and moved away.

A tall, lean young man, quite good-looking except for his wolfish expression and lackluster eyes, was standing passive in front of the last table in the examination hut, the one at which the results of all the tests were collated into a whole and the subject accepted or rejected. The lieutenant glanced at him before turning to the sergeant behind the table with

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his stacks of documents and computing equipment before him.

"What's the problem?" he said.

"Literacy, sir," the sergeant answered. "He passed the physical—here's the assessment: slight traces of deficiency diseases, but nothing serious, and a patch on the lung which can be cured with a day's chemotherapy. Passed the non-verbal section of the intelligence test and checked out at just under the limit. Passed the manual skills tests, the reflex tests and the speed-of-learning tests all within the permitted margins. The tester says he'd show up even better if he'd been fed first. But he can't even write his own name."

"Give me the speed-of-learning results," the lieutenant said. Waiting for them to be handed up, he took another look at the subject. Dirty, of course; his hair probably wasn't that tarnished color when it was clean, if it ever had been clean. But well set up. On the other hand, he must be past his teens. It was hard to judge his age, because of the prematurely ancient dullness in his eyes. Provided he wasn't word-blind, though, he sounded like a good prospect for training.

He riffled through the pages of the speed-of-learning test. There was one test used for illiterates which involved the recognition of quasi-letter shapes. If he'd checked out well on that one—yes, here it was, and he had—then he was acceptable.

"Yes, check him through," he told the sergeant. "Thumb-print his contract on the signature block, and that'll do."

Kazan, not caring in the least what happened to him because he ought by rights to be dead and could not find in himself the desire to live, mechanically obeyed the orders given to him. He had come here in the first place because that was where most of the people from the Dyasthala happened to be going; they had heard of a chance to leave the planet, and because the Dyasthala was a heap of smoking ruins and they had to sleep on the streets they were assembling at the spaceport. He had gone through the tests because they were put to him and he was given orders. His existence was not up to Kazan any longer. Kazan was dead.

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This was a body operated in his name. Nothing else could account for the fact that he was still—apparently—alive.

The machinelike efficiency with which the applicants were processed suited his frame of mind, moreover. It was good to be organized, directed, measured, weighed, tested, moved from here to there by someone else's decision. He had not had to wonder what to do for several hours, since he joined the line waiting to be examined.

Half a dozen other acceptees were sent out with him to the ship. The processing continued: bathing and delousing; medication; physical measurements; a meal, taken standing in a large cargo hold where every footstep or word spoken above a whisper brought booming metallic echoes; the issue of a kit in exchange for the rags he was wearing, which had once been splendid but which were crusted with mud and blood.

Finally he was being led by a uniformed sergeant down a long corridor into the bowels of the ship. The sergeant had a list in his hand; one by one he allotted members of the group which included Kazan to certain doors off the corridor. Each time a door was opened Kazan had a glimpse of racked bunks beyond, separated head from foot by lockers and side from side by narrow walkways. Each room seemed to have about a dozen bunks.

He was the last to be ordered through a door. The sergeant opened it for him and closed it behind him when he had sidled through with his new kit. Suddenly at a loss because he had no longer any guidance, Kazan looked around him dully. There were four or five others already here—women as well as men—and one of the men was rising slowly to his feet from the bunk on which he had been sitting.

It seemed to Kazan that he remembered this man out of a distant past. Out of a previous life, perhaps. He did not remember the look of sick terror which was now distorting the man's features.

"Kazan!" the man moaned. Kazan gave him a further inquiring glance. He nodded and looked for an empty bunk on which to set his gear.

The man seemed to gulp an enormous mouthful of air. As if compelled by something outside himself, he took three

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rapid paces to close the gap between them and put his big hard hand briefly on Kazan's chest.

"But you can't be here," he said. His voice broke like a child's, and the words were followed by a whimper. Then he spun to face the others present, who were staring puzzled at his extraordinary actions.

"He's dead!" he choked out. "It's his devil that's brought him! He's dead and eaten in the lake by the fortress, and his devil has brought him back! Don't you understand me? That's Kazan, the man Bryda sold to the power of darkness, the man who walked on the air to rescue Prince Luth! He's a dead man walking, I tell you! Get out of here!"

He was barely in time to lead the rush from the door.

VII

CAPTAIN OGRIC halted abruptly in his tracks. From somewhere in the belly of the ship was coming such a clashing and banging one would have thought a herd of wild animals was coming aboard instead of a collection of raggedy, underfed migrant workers. He had been on his way to dine with the port commandant, a traditional act of courtesy the last night before a ship lifted for space.

But at the racket which he heard, he turned aside and began to stride down a corridor in the direction from which the cries and crashes came.

Rounding a corner, he went full tilt into his master-at-arms, who jumped back with a cry of dismay and threw up a smart salute. Captain Ogric, who was known as White Dwarf to his crew because of his small size and illimitable energy, fixed him with a glare.

"For the love of life, what's going on?" he demanded.

"Beginning of a riot in the workers' quarters, sir," the master-at-arms said. "We're penning it up as much as we

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can, but there seems to be some superstitious reason at the bottom of it which they're more scared of than they are of my men. A small group of them turned out of the cabin allotted because they said they wouldn't share it with another man who was just sent aboard. Claim he's a zombie, or something—say he's a dead man walking. Some local cult, I guess.

"We took out the man who started the trouble, a big bully called Hego—white as a sheet, practically wetting himself with raw terror. You never saw anything like it, sir! I thought I'd avoid further trouble by transferring the so-called 'dead man' to another cabin, but the word got around, and half of them are saying they won't fly in the same ship as him. Want to break out of the ship and go back to the city."

"Ugly?" the captain rapped.

"Quiet at the moment. But rumbling. Like a volcano." The master-at-arms wiped sweat off his forehead. "I was just going to send down to the examination huts for Lieutenant Balden."

Ogric kept his face from showing his feelings, but he made a mental note to remind Lieutenant Balden privately that when he was put in charge of getting a batch of workers aboard, that didn't mean lounging at the barrier gate and eyeing the women among them. But he wasted only a moment on that. In the forefront of his mind was what the port commandant had told him when he first landed and went to present his compliments.

"I wish you joy of them," the port commandant had said. "But I'll tell you what your advertising is going to bring in—the dirtiest bunch of thieves and cutthroats who ever disgraced this continent. They'll come out of the Dyasthala, the thieves' slum in the city which they cleared the other day about half a century after the job fell due. I guess your only advantage is that none of them will trust any of the others out of sight, so you won't have the danger of them organizing mutiny. But you'd best make the trip a fast one to Vashti—or I wouldn't put it past them to conceive the idea of taking over your ship and setting up as pirates."

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Was it starting before they'd lifted for space?

Ogric wished profoundly that he could simply turn the lot of them back on the ground and go somewhere else for his workers. But he was in government service, and under orders to supply willing labor for the Vashti mines, so he'd have to make the best of it.

"All right!" he said, making up his mind. "Hold the rest of the intake in the hold where they're being fed. Close off all the corridors leading out of the workers' quarters. Get Lieutenant Balden to sort out the zombie, the man who started it, and anyone else he thinks, or you think, might put us in the picture, and have them up in my cabin in half an hour. And get the workers calmed down. And send a man to the port commandant with my compliments and tell him I'll be late for dinner. Got that?"

"Aye, sir," the master-at-arms said, and doubled away.

"He's a what?" the intellectual lieutenant said, sounding rather bored, when the master-at-arms came panting with the message.

"Sold to a devil, they say. And they're so scared of him they'd rather go back to starvation than ship to Vashti with him even with their contracts worth twenty thousand."

A horrifying memory clicked in the lieutenant's mind. He straightened up as though he had been kicked at the base of the spine and stared wildly around for Zethel. But there was no sign of the big man.

Sold to a devil? And supposed to be dead? It couldn't really be the original of the story. But if even the government authorities of Berak had taken the notion seriously enough to clear out the thieves' quarter and thus risk spreading some thousands of the criminal class all over their city, then who could say what the illiterate superstitious might not make of it? He had to swallow hard before he could trust his voice; then he barked at the master-at-arms to come with him back to the ship and show him where the trouble was.

The corridors in the workers' quarters were lined with anxious faces peering out of the doors. Some of the bolder ones had emerged despite the threat of men armed with gas-

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guns at every intersection, and were warily eying each other as though none of them was sure who the "dead man" really was.

Lieutenant Balden halted nervously, looking down the corridor where the trouble had begun. In a low voice he spoke to the master-at-arms.

"Tell them I'm coming to put this thing right," he said. "Promise them there'll be no trouble."

The master-at-arms shouted the message ringingly down the corridor. It had no visible effect, except that some of the men and women in the passage drew back into nearby rooms. A dry feeling in his throat, the lieutenant allowed the master-at-arms to lead him forward.

Before the last door in the corridor they paused. "I think he's still in here," the master-at-arms said, leaning on the panel and sliding it aside. "Yes. That's him."

"Him?" the lieutenant echoed in surprise. He stepped forward involuntarily. Yes, it was definitely the pale-haired, old-young man he had seen at the examination hut. And come to think of it, there had been a dead look in his eyes.

He choked the idea off firmly. Glancing around the cabin, he saw gear belonging to about four or five other people scattered on the bunks. And one other person besides the pale-haired young man—a girl, about the same age, with plain untidy brown hair cut irregularly short, her freshly scrubbed face rather attractive and heavily freckled across the nose and cheekbones, her mouth full and almost pouting. She was taking garments out of the bag in which they had been issued to her and stowing them in a locker, as calm as could be.

The pale-haired young man, on the other hand, was doing nothing at all but staring into space.

"You!" Balden said. "Are you the cause of all this trouble? Are you the man that everyone's saying is possessed of a devil?"

The lackluster eyes turned to look at him. The head gave a forward dip that might have been a stillborn nod.

"The name's Kazan," the master-at-arms supplied. "Anonymous orphan; that's his whole name."

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"Kazan!" Balden said. "What's it all about? What started this nonsense about you being back from the dead?"

"I am," Kazan said in a rustling voice, and went on staring into space.

Helpless, Balden hesitated a moment and then switched his attention to the girl. "You there!" he said. "What's your name?"

"Clary," she answered. "That's my whole name, too."

"Were you here when this began?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you run with the rest of them, then?"

She raised burning eyes to him. They were a little sunken in her face, as though she had been undernourished for a long time. She said with a touch of scorn, "The man who started it was a lumbering fool called Hego, with much more muscle than brain and less guts. I'm from the Dyasthala. I don't believe in devils. And anyone with an eye in his head could see that *he* isn't any more dead than I am. Feel him—he's warm. He's got a pulse. Hego must be insane."

The master-at-arms said puzzledly, "If he is crazy, sir, how come he got through the examinations?"

It crossed Balden's mind wildly that a parallel question might be, "If Kazan is dead, how did *he* get past?" But he pulled himself together before he voiced the words. He said, "All right, both of you. Come with me. We'll take you up to the captain and get it straightened out."

His impatience mounting visibly, like a needle on a dial ascending towards the red danger mark, Ogric listened to Hego, then to Balden's gloss on the story, quoted from Zethel, then to the master-at-arms, Clary, and four other workers who said they also knew the story, chosen from at least a hundred.

Halfway through the fourth confirmatory recitation, Ogric slammed his open palm on the arm of his chair with a sound like a firecracker and bounced to his feet.

"Enough!" he barked. "I never heard anything like it! A walking corpse! Devils! Miracles! Lunacy, all of it—half comet-dust and half nightmares! You there sitting like a booby in the corner—what's your name, Kazan! You've

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listened to this garbage about your coming back from the dead. What have you got to say about it?"

Kazan shrugged. He didn't seem very interested. He said, "You heard what Hego said. It's quite true. They threw me in the lake with my hands manacled."

"Then how by the blaze of Sirius did you get out alive?" Ogric demanded.

A curious look crossed Kazan's face. He said, "I—I think something bit through the manacles. And something took hold of me, and another creature attacked it, and I found myself in the mud on the beach."

From Hego, standing by the door with his face sheet-white, a groan like a dying man's. He could not tear his fascinated gaze from Kazan, not even to blink.

"Quiet, you!" Ogric ordered. He drove fist into palm. "Well, the answer's simple enough. We'll put him back on the ground, since most of these idiots won't ship with him, and we can better afford to lose one man than hundreds."

"Did he sign the same contract I signed?" Clary said. Her small face seemed to have set like stone, and her eyes burned more fiercely than ever.

"What?" Ogric snapped.

"I can read," Clary said. "The contract I signed was solid as rock. Bound you, as well as me. I have my eye on cash at the time when I think about marrying. Did you ask *him* whether he wants to dissolve the contract? Or do I go back down with the rest of the workers and tell them the contracts they've signed are so much wrapping paper?"

Ogric lowered himself into his chair again, staring at her. He said, "What's your interest in this, young woman?"

"None, specially." She shrugged. "Except I don't like fools"—she shot a contemptuous glance at Hego—"and I don't like seeing people made fools of."

Balden cleared his throat. He said, "If I could make a suggestion, Captain—"

Ogric spun his chair to face the lieutenant. In a frosty voice suggesting he didn't think the suggestion would be worth hearing, he said, "Yes?"

"I saw this man's test results. He'd be worth keeping anyway as valuable material to train for a responsible job. We've

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got one worker here—this girl Clary—who scoffs at the superstitious nature of the others. We can probably find enough to fill, or partly fill, one of the cabins. Then we can persuade the rest by playing on their greed or by shaming them that they're being foolish. The Vashti pull isn't too long from here."

"Any pull with this situation stewing aboard the ship would be too long," Ogric growled. "But the proposal seems sensible enough. Come to think of it, if anyone might well be put on the ground again, it's this shivering idiot Hego. But no doubt you, young woman"—he gave an ironical half-bow to Clary—"would have something to say about that as well."

Clary returned his gaze evenly. "You wouldn't be making a fool of him," she said. "He's been one since birth, looks like."

Ogric couldn't help it. He chuckled. "You've a head on your shoulders," he said approvingly. "Let's see if there's something in it. You're going to see if you can find ten more like yourself among these silly workers, who'll have the sense you've shown—and if you do it, there's a bonus for you on top of your contract pay."

VIII

No ONE could have said whether it was the struggle between superstitious fear and simple greed, or merely Dyasthala cunning, which in the end compelled Ogric to promise a contract bonus to those workers who agreed to share quarters with Kazan as well as to Clary herself for finding them. There were going to be some pointed questions asked when he presented the accounts for this trip; still, he'd got off lighter than if he'd been obliged to honor the forfeiture clause in one of the contracts, or if he'd lost half the workers

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already signed up and had to hold back his departure while he hunted down some replacements.

In fact, it had not occurred to Clary to suggest to those she approached the idea of holding out for a bonus like hers. It wasn't in the frame of reference of Dyasthala thinking. The reason she had sprung to Kazan's aid in the captain's cabin was because she and he both were opposed to authority—it wasn't out of sympathy. The offer of the bonus, certainly, had worked in her case very well; without it she would never have argued so persuasively with the reluctant workers.

And it was clear that she wasn't completely successful. That could be seen from the way the new occupants of the cabin hesitated when they came through the door for the first time, looking about them, seeing Kazan, being only slightly reassured on finding Clary calmly sitting on the next bunk to his. And it went on as it had begun. None of the others spent any more time than they had to in Kazan's company, and often during the sleep period a light would go on, and one of the people in the cabin would lean over the side of the bunk and stare down at Kazan as though to make sure he was genuinely asleep and not dead.

At first Clary had viewed these goings-on with real scorn. In her mind she classed Hego with the foolish but wealthy people who had sometimes sent into the Dyasthala to consult the so-called witches and wizards there. Everyone in the thieves' quarter knew that their trances and oracles, their illusions and their speaking with tongues, were just another way of parting rich folk from their money, rating somewhere on the criminal scale between confidence trickery and the disguising of stolen goods for resale.

Then it gradually dawned on her, first, that many of what she regarded as her own people seemed to have caught the contagious fear of Kazan; second, that Kazan himself—aside from confirming Hego's story in the captain's presence, which could be discounted—had never said anything one way or the other.

This was alarming.

Kazan, indeed, appeared not to be in the least involved in what went on around—and often because of—him. It seemed to make no difference that for the duration of the voyage

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he was the key person aboard the ship. When he was not required for some duty or other, or to collect his thrice-daily rations in the workers' canteen, he lay on his bunk, staring at the underside of the bunk above. It occurred to Clary at last that he might as well have been really dead. He was dead in his mind.

She'd seen cases like that in the Dyasthala. They were everywhere. But at first she could not associate the pale, calm, rather handsome Kazan with the slack-lipped and filthy idiots who could be found in the old days playing with the gutter mud of the thieves' quarters, sometimes seizing a bright coin tossed to them with a little chuckle of pleasure at such a gaudy plaything—and usually losing it again to a child of normal intelligence who know how to trade it for some worthless but glittering scrap of colored glass.

Long experience in handling random-gathered groups of migrant workers had developed a system in the fleet of ships serving the Vashti mines. Though Ogric had spoken dismally of any voyage as being too long with a problem like Kazan aboard, in fact the tension was kept under control by fairly simple means. Keep the minds of the workers occupied, was the prime rule.

Hence during every arbitrary day there was a training class in the canteen, to teach some administrative job, or to put a shine on the reading ability of those who possessed it. There were also many entertainments—by the standard of the crew's home world, very crude, but to the children of the Dyasthala and in fact to most of the other workers new and interesting. As a result, Kazan was often left by himself in the cabin, staring at nothing.

That gave Clary her chance.

She slid back the door-panel almost silently and stepped through as though afraid of being heard, then closed it with equal care. No one was present except Kazan, who lay as usual flat on his back, his vacant eyes on the bunk over him. There were folding seats clipped to the walls. Clary took one of these gently from its place and opened it as she walked to the side of Kazan's bunk.

Then she slammed it down on the floor with a crash that

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made the metal of the cabin ring angrily, and sat on it. Even that barely disturbed the mirror surface of Kazan's calm.

"All right," she said when he had rolled his head incuriously to look at her. "Out with it, Kazan. Who are you?"

As simply as that, it began.

For that question was the key to the nightmare haunting him—a darkness populated with hungry monsters, in which his mouth, open to scream, filled with sour water and the taste of the beasts around, in which his ears were deafened first by a rasping hoot rising towards a whistle, then by a rush of water. A struggle against cruel steel shackles holding his wrists, so that he could not even strike out against the huge threatening creatures that shared the darkness with him.

That was the beginning. What followed was that the darkness took a shape—a vague, formless, ill-defined shape with ember eyes. He seemed to be outside it and inside it at the same time, for he could look at it and still be engulfed by it.

The remorseless argument that went with the macabre images fell too readily into words. Kazan had gone to his death. Kazan manacled and helpless who had forgotten the trick of making steps of air had plunged into the lake and been swallowed up.

But Kazan had also been sold to a devil by human devils who had not asked his leave, and the devil had taken him out of the clutch of death to serve for a year and a day. Kazan accordingly was dead. Let the devil move the corpse as he would, Kazan could have no part in it.

Yet, he was still aware. He could remember things, foggily, as he had remembered that he knew Hego. He had no sense of discontinuity except the break between the moment when he was seized by the thing in the black water, and the moment he realized he had been flung on to a patch of soft mud beside the lake, and aside from his bruises and the sickness the foul water had brought on him was unhurt. He could even remember the click which he had felt rather than heard when the vast cruel beak made its first stab at him and severed the steel cuffs linking his wrists. He could even remember that the end of the beak was rough, and had

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rasped the skin of his back, and torn a hole in his fine black shirt with the silver piping, so that afterwards the thermo-static circuitry did not work.

Or perhaps the water had put it out of action.

Was he Kazan, saved by a combination of miracles? Or was he the puppet of a black being with eyes like coals?

"Who are you, Kazan?"

That fresh-faced girl insisting that he answer—he could hate her for voicing the question, he could pound her to a sack of bones in blue-bruised skin because he had wished to do that to Bryda and her sneering lover, the prince. He had come from the shore of the lake driven by only that lasting hatred out of all the many desires which once had motivated him as Kazan. He had been cheated, as they informed him much later.

Some of that part was blurred, too. Could the break have come there? No, for when he set his mind to it and concentrated he knew there was, in fact, no break.

Only his mind flinched away from some of the happenings at that time. The memories blended and ran into each other, like wet colors laid too closely side by side. The burning of the Dyasthala, the laying low of the buildings with crackling violence, and the people swarming out like insects from a disturbed nest—was it then that he had suffered the beating? Or was that when he went hunting for Bryda and Luth, and they took him for a madman and wanted to put him in a hospital, misled by his fine clothes into thinking he was one of the haughty? Then, the quality of what he wore showed despite the soaking in the filthy lake. Later he was dressed as he had been for most of his life—in rags. And a stink of himself.

Part of that picture ran off in its turn into a vision of the fine big room, and himself in front of the mirror, admiring garments he had demanded as the price of doing—what? No one could believe that he, Kazan, had carved steps out of the air and brought Prince Luth down them from prison. Not even Kazan could believe that. The devil did it. Using the body named Kazan. The vision of the mirror and himself so smartly clothed ran into a blurred picture of his rags and dirt, sometimes before his encounter with Bryda and the

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conjuror, sometimes after, at the time when he went with the rest to join the gray line on the gray concrete under the gray sky because in some obscure manner he had understood that this was a means of escape.

And last of all the vision of himself changed to a black, ill-defined shape which gazed into the mirror with eyes like dying coals.

That was the point where he started to scream.

Unnerved by the suddenness of his tortured cry, Clary leapt back from his side, upsetting the stool on which she had been sitting. Her face going pale, she listened and watched for as long as she could endure it. Some of the things that poured out made her mouth work and forced her to close her eyes for long seconds together.

Then, when she could stand no more, she hurled herself at the door and clawed it open. She fled incontinently down the corridor.

At the barrier between the crew's quarters and those of the worker-cargo, she hammered till a spaceman came in answer. Seeing her, he immediately made to slam the barrier into place again; a worker had no business bothering the crew. He just had time to regret so doing.

Panting, Clary stood over his unconscious form. She hoped she hadn't hit him too hard. A blow to the vocal cords was dangerous, and could easily kill. But it was his own fault, for not realizing that a weak-looking girl in the Dyasthala could not possibly have been weak, or she would never have survived her teens.

She had no idea which way to go now she was in the crew's area of the ship. She could see only more corridors. The ship was riddled with them, like a piece of old and worm-infested wood. Things were rather more luxurious here, but to a Dyasthala thief gradations like that were of small importance. At random she decided which way to go, and broke into a stumbling run.

By a chance which later she looked back on as a small miracle, the first crewman she encountered since the misguided man who had tried to slam the barrier in her face was the only officer she had seen before except the captain. Catching sight of him fifty paces distant down a corridor

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that she crossed, she shouted at him and he turned. He recognized her at once. After a glance behind him, seeming nervous, he began to walk towards her.

"What is it?" he said. "And what are you doing in this part of the ship, anyway?"

"Have you got a doctor in this—this flying mantrap?" she flung at him.

Balden blinked. Again he glanced behind him, as though hoping someone would come to his aid. He said, "Ah—yes, we do have doctors aboard."

"Then you'd better get one of them down to Kazan quick," Clary said. "He's sick in the head. That's what's been the trouble all along. What difference does it make whether his devil was real or not, if he thinks it was real? And"—her face twisted suddenly with remembered disgust—"he thinks it was real. By the wynds, he thinks it was real"

IX

WHEN THE white-coated young doctor brought Kazan back to the boundary of the crew's and workers' quarters two ships' days later, Clary was waiting for him. He seemed to be in a daze, but it could be seen at once that something had happened to change him. He walked as though he meant it, was the way Clary summed it up to herself, instead of going with a kind of indefinable reluctance.

The doctor nodded to her. "You must be Clary," he said. "Well, here he is. All yours."

"How is he?" Clary demanded. "What was wrong with him?"

"Interesting case," the doctor said with a trace of professional warmth. "I'm not absolutely sure what happened to him, of course. There hasn't been very much time, but what I think is that this narrow escape from death he had sent

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him into a sort of fugue. The lack of affect was typical, and he had incomplete amnesia—rejection of unpleasant memories. I see this doesn't mean very much to you, though. Get him to talk to you about it himself, then. He has all his memory back now, and it's up to him to make his own kind of sense out of it. You're his girl?"

"Not that I've noticed," Clary said.

The doctor looked her up and down in a way that was not at all professional. A glint of humor showed in his eyes. He said, "He must have been in a worse way than I thought. Well, he'll get another check before we hit Vashti, and I'll have a word with the base doctor—show him my records. But he ought to be okay from now on."

He raised his hand and stepped back while the barrier was pushed into place again. Clary found herself thinking that he was rather nice.

She turned away and found Kazan studying her as though seeing her for the first time. His eyes had come alive in his face now, as if his mind had been brought out from under a cloud. He said, "I feel a lot different. Thank you."

The moment she heard his voice she too had a feeling that this was a first meeting. Unaccountable embarrassment made her glance down at the floor; she saw herself make a child-like movement with one foot, as she might have dug her toe into the ground a long way away in the Dyasthala. She muttered, "Well, I didn't do anything."

"Thanks anyway," he countered.

She hesitated. Then the urgent need to know what had come of this startling change in him caught hold of her. She gestured down the corridor. "Everyone is at the class in the canteen," she said. "Come and tell me what they did to you, and what really caused your trouble."

A few moments later they were sitting facing each other in the empty cabin and Kazan was leaning back and looking with a puzzled expression at a spot on the far wall.

"What they did to me," he said. "That—well, I'm not sure. The doctor tried to tell me, but I didn't get most of it." A frustrated note crept into his voice. "He said something about selective stimulation of the brain. They put something over my head, and I went through all the things that were

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bothering me in a sort of slow motion so I had the chance to pick out what was real and what wasn't. It didn't hurt, but some of the things made me *sweat*."

"But you know why you were in the mess you'd got into?" Clary pressed him.

"That, yes." Kazan rubbed his hands together thoughtfully. "Do I have to tell you about the lake, and the rest of that?"

Clary shook her head quickly. She said, "I heard that just—just before I went to get the doctor to you. It was horrible."

"That's so. But—well, see it like this. I came to on the mudbank by the lake, and just about all I could feel was that I was full of hate. To my ears I was full of it. I didn't care about that dustbrain Hego, or the other one who helped to put me in the lake, Axam. It was Bryda I was after, and her sneering Prince Luth. I was going after them. I was going to sell out Luth's proposed revolt, first of all. But that was too remote to satisfy me. Short of throwing him and Bryda in the lake where they'd thrown me, I wanted to see them die some other way. A good, ugly way."

Clary tried not to shudder, and failed. There was still acid venom in Kazan's voice when he spoke of Bryda and Luth.

"Well, it would take too long to tell you everything that got in my way. The thing that finished it was simple. Luth had this man Yarco serving him—a good guy, that I might have liked if I hadn't met him the way I did. Yarco had been lost on a bet before he was born to the prince's father, and he'd spent fifty years of life pledged to the royal family, never free to lift a finger for himself. And the night I was put in the lake Yarco killed himself. Word got around. It was held to be a bad omen. So when the prince's revolt started to go wrong, someone close to him decided to cut his losses and poisoned him. I don't know what happened to Bryda. Maybe the same.

"You see, the only thing which had been driving me since I got up off the mud by the lake was my need to get even with Luth. I lost the chance. I got the idea into my head

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that I should have been dead anyway. So I acted as dead as I could, I guess."

"How did they get you out of it?" Clary said.

Kazan shrugged. "Just made me see I was being a fool. I don't know about that devil yet—and what seems crazy, I know for sure now that I didn't dream about making the steps in the air. I really did that, and not even what the doctor put me through made me remember how I worked the trick. It doesn't worry the doctor; he just said it was a quasi-real memory, whatever that means, and would take a long time to set right, but it wouldn't worry me badly any more. Because he made me see the important thing."

"Which is—?"

"That it was me, and not any devil, that got me out of the lake alive. He said some of it was sheer luck, but the rest was myself. He explained how sometimes under stress your mind will go into overdrive, and you'll do things that will get you out of trouble without having to waste time on figuring them through beforehand. He made me see that the way my manacles were bitten through was the result of my desperately trying to get away from the monster's beak. And the way I got thrown on shore was a result of the monster trying to get a tasty morsel—me—out of reach of a competitor."

"You're not satisfied with that, are you?" Clary said in an even voice.

There was a long silence. Kazan stared at her, a haunted look coming and going behind his eyes. He said at last, "No. How could you tell?"

"You sound as though you're trying to convince yourself," she answered.

He got to his feet and began to pace back and forth in the narrow limits of the walkway between the bunks. "The doctor did warn me," he said after three turns. "But he said what counted was that now I've started to think that I can do something about it again, instead of just refusing to face it because it was too big for me."

"You've certainly made a start on that," Clary said, wanting to reassure him. "But something is still worrying you."

"Yes, this devil, that's all. Because if the devil was a clever

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conjuring trick to delude Bryda, then I didn't make the steps in the air. I couldn't have. But Hego was there and saw me do it. Many people saw me. And if the devil was real—"

He broke off and sat down, his face going pale.

"What?" she prompted.

"Then I'm pledged to it for a year and a day," Kazan said in a dull voice.

She rose from her place opposite him and sat down beside him, putting her arm round his shoulders in a comforting gesture. She said, "Kazan, why don't you just think it out? Do you feel that this—this devil is doing anything to you? Haven't you been shown that your own actions can account for what's happened? Surely if you can't find any difference in yourself then that's the same as there being no difference."

"I guess so," he said wearily, putting his palms up to rub at his eyes in a quick tired gesture.

"What did the doctor say about that?"

"Pretty much what you've said. Tell you the trouble, though. There's one man I'd have liked to ask about it, and I can't, because he's dead. That was Yarco. He used to sort of hint at the way he felt, never having been his own master. He used to talk about the decree of the wyrds, and about our being at the mercy of the stars. It seemed to make sense to him. It explained his life for him. But I never took the opportunity of talking about it with him, and now I never can."

Clary was silent for a moment, frowning. She felt frustrated. Her mind wasn't used to coping with such abstract problems as these—the nature of possession if there was such a thing, of human destiny, of free will and bondage. She could get an intuitive grasp of the way Kazan must be suffering, but she could not hold on to the concepts long enough to show in words that she understood. But there was something frightening about his predicament, she could tell that, and she was moved to do the only thing she could, which was to show her sympathy.

She said awkwardly, "It seems to me you could think yourself into his place. It doesn't seem all that different from

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having been born in the Dyasthala, to me. That was a weight, too. I made up my mind when I was just a kid that I was going to get out of the Dyasthala, and I worked at it. Learned to read. Learned to count. Took whatever I could whenever I could that looked as if it might come in useful to get me out of there. I'd looked at all the people who didn't make it. I didn't want to end like them. Know what I mean?"

Kazan turned his head and after a moment's pause nodded.

"But I guess I wouldn't ever have made it," she went on in a lower voice. "Not if they hadn't cleared the whole quarter and made us get out. There were always too many problems. There was always the one you couldn't figure out before you ran into it, because it wasn't part of the Dyasthala's world. And those were the problems you didn't get the chance to tackle a second time, so it wasn't any good learning from your first mistake."

"I do know what you mean," Kazan said. He leaned his elbows on his knees. "Is that why you signed on to work on Vashti?"

"Well—somewhat. But there was the man I was living with, too—the man who taught me to read. He thought he was going to live off me, and I didn't."

Kazan nodded. He didn't need details.

"And you?" Clary said.

"Why did I join the line to sign on, you mean? Oh, mostly I went because that was where people from the Dyasthala were going. I had this crazy notion out of fear. I was going back into the Dyasthala because people have always gone there to hide, and I guess I hoped in the back of my mind that the devil couldn't trace me there. Same reason took me out to the spaceport with the rest. Maybe the devil couldn't follow me off the planet. But that was a crazy hope, of course."

Something in his tone alerted Clary. She said sharply, "What do you mean?"

"When the conjurer called up the devil inside his ring," Kazan said slowly, "the first thing the devil said was, 'What world is this?' And the conjurer said something in reply. I

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thought it was a charm to control the devil. But I heard it pretty clearly, it turned out, and the doctor was able to make me remember it even though I didn't understand it. He recorded it and played it to me, and said that it was a set of stellar co-ordinates. Like an address, he said. The conjurer was actually telling the devil what world he had come to and where it lay in the galaxy."

He shivered; she felt it all up the arm she had laid across his shoulders.

"If you want to look at it that way," she said, "it's a pretty poor devil that has to be told where it's come to. I think you're right in hoping that it can't follow you to Vashti. How's it to know where you've gone?"

He shook his head. "No, you don't understand," he said in a hopeless voice. "I was pledged for a year and a day, and only a couple of months have gone by. The problem isn't: how would it know where I've gone? It's how am I to know what it meant by service, and how do I know that I'm not already serving it by going to Vashti? Maybe it wanted me on Vashti!"

When Clary could offer no answer, he got to his feet. A crooked smile lit his face, which reassured her a little. He said, "Of course, I know the only thing to do is to wait and see. And a year and a day isn't long anyway. Whatever the doctor did for me, he at least seems to have given me the guts to sweat it out. And you're helping me too, you know."

Clary met his eyes steadily. After a moment she said, "I'm very glad. I really am very glad indeed."

X

FOR KAZAN, that was to be born—into this curious self-contained traveling world which was the ship, the thing by definition going somewhere and yet as it vibrated through

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the dark spaces carrying ignorance within itself, in the skulls of the travelers. The ship was enclosed. It was still, so far as anyone aboard could tell; even the engineers who controlled it never directly perceived its motion, but read dials emotionlessly. To Kazan this was a parable of himself. A journey undertaken in a womb, like a mother bearing her foetus unknowing, beginning at the familiar Berak spaceport and ending soon on Vashti.

A word. A label without an object. A scrap of tacky paper clinging to the fingers against attempts to throw it away.

Here, there had to be the start of an understanding of himself. To accept was not enough if he had to wrestle with the central problem: is Kazan Kazan or is he a black devil? They had said, "He is highly intelligent." He began now to realize what the word meant, because it applied itself to his worries. It wasn't the Dyasthala comment: "He's sharp." That was a business of assessing risk, of knowing how best to organize a pattern of action centered on a clothman's store, or a drunken spaceman, so that it ended with safety and anonymity and a handful of cash instead of the impersonal retribution of the law.

In the Dyasthala, Kazan's world: hunger yesterday, fullness today, randomly. The belly had no chance to build its own clock. Time was different. The wakening into the world of the ship, so arbitrary—like being *inside* a clock, because the passage of time was totally controlled—was another difference to add to others. Emergent, the new Kazan chose this fact for a centerpole of personality, thinking of Yarco and his sighing resignation to the decree of the wyrds. He would still have liked to talk to Yarco about his situation, but not to learn more of Yarco's way of adapting; now, to try and make him see that it was not universally applicable.

The Kazan of the Dyasthala (curious, that Clary should have seen the same parallel as he, between Yarco's state of bondage and the invisible bonds tying down inhabitants of the Dyasthala!) had been tempted by Yarco's philosophy. The Kazan of the ship was not. It was clear to him from looking around that men could organize the events they ex-

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perienced. What he had to do was make himself believe that he was the organizer, and that was difficult.

A creature hatched from an egg, he thought, would be in his condition. In the egg it was certainly—for at least a little while—living and aware. It could be heard to move for a time before it cracked or tore open the shell or tough integument about it. Already it was in a sense independent, before it came out. He also. Not as a womb-born child. For him this would come later, perhaps, after landing on Vashti, with the opening of the ship, which would be soon.

Meantime he had to wrestle in his mind, and fanatical urgency stemming from the shortness of the time till the shell opened on Vashti created for him the exact reverse of the dull apathy he had shown when he came aboard. He had to know. He had to know his past as much as his present.

The Dyasthala: the cracked walls and the tilted flagstones of the streets, the smells and sights and sounds. List them, and they were not pretty. They were smells of rotting garbage, which was not garbage in the Dyasthala so long as anyone could conceive any use at all for it, and of the people who found such uses and descended to them. They were sights of children in gutters and parents in rags. They were sounds of screams, from pain or from hate.

The heritage Kazan carried with him into his new existence was compounded of that, and his need to be himself. He had to work hardest of all at being himself, because he was so frightened of being a black devil instead.

Who was anybody? He took to staring curiously at the other workers, sometimes without their noticing for long minutes together as they attended to some small task or relaxed, eyes closed, wondering: what is in that person which makes him, or her, *not me*? There would be a clue to himself there, perhaps. And again he had to spend time feverishly working over the Dyasthala memories, the memories of the period of parturition, the memories of the new and vivid self, which seemed to be lit from within by a powerful lamp.

Merely to be able to categorize his existence in that way—as a sentient egg-born creature might categorize his into intra-ovular preconscious, intra-ovular conscious, and extra-

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ovular—led him to views of being which he could not before have found the mental strength to handle.

Still he lacked words for much of what occurred to him; among his fellow workers were some whose education had gone beyond an elementary level and he cornered these and sweated out for them a set of verbal parameters defining the thing he wanted to name and had no word for, while they cowered back and flinched and shot glances from side to side, seeking a way of escape. Often they gave him words; often they could not. He made the best of what they offered. Fixation. Conditioning. Instinctual. Subconscious. Logic. Intellectual. Whether he attached the handles to precisely the right concepts didn't matter. At least he had something to take hold of in his mind.

The effect of this on the workers was to create dismay. Just when they had shamed themselves into seeing that the object of their superstitious fear was an apathetic and harmless being who hardly offered a word even when spoken to, and never any violent act, he turned to this baffling dynamic person who did not seem able to find time even for sleep, but must always be demanding knowledge of themselves, how they thought, why they thought as they did, what they thought about life and awareness, problems that few of them had ever considered and none of them could discuss.

His whole world had opened out again, like a shell being cracked. It was as it had been when Bryda had him taken to the shore of the sour-water lake, and he had known discomfort because he was out of sight of buildings. His perspectives had broadened in a day—from the Dyasthala to the whole of Berak then, and knowledge that human affairs could transcend such business as he had learned in the Dyasthala; from that hesitant halfway stage now, to a burgeoning concept of the stars. It was painful in a way, but it was necessary and sometimes it was also exciting.

He was intelligent, they had told him. This was what it meant to be intelligent: not to close in the universe around oneself for comfort and reassurance, but to have the itch in the brain which demanded return again and again to insoluble problems. Who? What? Why? How? The archetypal simplicity of basic questions astonished him. It had never

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struck him before that the simpler a question the more general it is, and hence the more complete the answer it demands. All this from wondering how he could tell whether he was Kazan or a black devil acting in Kazan's name!

Like firecrackers spitting tiny red sparks in darkness, a succession of memories crackled in his head. Bryda, throwing back her dark hair scornfully—she had been very beautiful, no denying—and being afraid of what she had brought about, afraid of the gutter-born thief on whose shoulders she had shifted a burden she dared not carry herself, and who mocked her by displaying a power that could have been hers had she not lacked courage. That was clear at once. She had wished Luth free not for any love she bore him—because gratitude then would have made her repay him, Kazan—but for the hope of regaining some lost power and position in the state. In Kazan she had seen a rival with good cause to hate her. So she had ordered him disposed of. He could almost pity her now.

And back beyond Bryda and everything that she had stabbed into the flesh of his life like a bright dagger were the people of the Dyasthala that he had known, not in friendship—for hunger was the eternal enemy who could split the fondest allies—but objectively, as those parts of his environment who were characterized by the ability to move and communicate. A certain woman with a scrofulous head who had kept a dirty bakery; a youth who, when Kazan was ten or twelve years old, had made himself the joyous subject of all the Dyasthala gossip by getting himself enrolled on someone else's birth record into the law force, so that by day he was the guardian of the city, and by night plundered it. He had had the first power-gun Kazan ever saw.

He had killed himself with it the day his confidence overreached itself and he was discovered for what he was.

These pawns of circumstance! These people who *must* have shared with his new self the power to ask questions and organize events, but to whom simple material problems were the equal of the bonds holding Yarco! Clary had said that but for the clearing of the Dyasthala and the compulsion to find somewhere else to go, she who had dreamed all her adolescent life of getting out, and had taken

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the dream seriously enough to sell her body in exchange for being taught to read and count, would never have actually gone.

True. Why?

Once he went to the barrier at the entry to the crew's quarters, and there hammered till he was answered, and asked to talk with the doctor who had treated him. He was allowed that much, and out of curiosity Lieutenant Balden also came to the doctor's office, and for the better part of an hour he fumbled through some of the ideas obsessing him.

But Balden grew bored quickly, and gave patronizing answers as to an ape with a rudimentary gift of speech, and after a short while the doctor—who up till then had been much more friendly—decided that he wanted to give Kazan another set of tests, and became so eager that he started to interrupt every few moments.

Eventually Balden left the office, and Kazan sighed and consented to take the tests, the doctor baiting the hook with the offer of advice and help when they were over. He dashed through them all; they were similar to the ones he had taken without interest in the examination hut at the spaceport in Berak. He waited, itching with impatience, while the doctor looked over what he had done, and finally demanded the advice and help he had been promised.

The doctor looked up with a wan smile. Then he rose from his chair and slid back a panel in the wall, revealing shelf upon shelf of tiny oblong boxes not much larger than Kazan's thumb. He indicated the lowest of the shelves.

"Those are microfilms," he said. "These boxes—there are a hundred and sixty-five of them—form one single set. I've owned them since I was a student, eight years ago, and I guess I've actually worked through less than a tenth of the total wordage in them. The title of the set goes like this: *Human Philosophy, Ethics and Religious Beliefs, a Five-Thousand-Year Survey*. The only advice I can possibly give you, Kazan, is this. Teach yourself to read, make yourself a fortune, pay for a century of geriatric treatment—and go and live by yourself out of reach of anyone else till you've read that book. If you don't go away by yourself, someone

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else will have invented a new philosophy before you've more than begun."

Kazan looked first blank, then angry. The doctor shrugged.

"I'm sorry," he said. "The simple fact is that there are that many answers to the kind of questions you're asking, and none of them is definitive."

When he left the office Kazan was fuming. By the time he was back in the workers' quarters, though, he had realized how sensible the doctor's suggestion was. He slid back the door of his cabin and found Clary there alone. She was often there alone now—not because she was a person to shun company, but because by imperceptible stages she had come to see what was happening to Kazan and had been fascinated by it. There had obviously been instructions to the crew to treat Kazan as a special case and allow him to do what he liked so long as he did not interfere with the other workers, and no attempt was made to force him or Clary to the daily classes or the entertainments. Far from objecting to this special treatment, the others seemed to find it a relief that they could be away from Kazan for most of the day.

At his slamming entrance Clary looked up, startled. She said, "Kazan, you look angry! What is it?" She put aside a book she had been leafing through. Kazan seized it and thrust it towards her again.

"Can you teach me to read?" he demanded.

A hint of a smile came to her mouth, and she cocked one eyebrow at him. "I've been wondering when you were going to ask that," she said composedly. "I'll try, if you like. Sit down."

Instead of obeying immediately, Kazan hesitated. He said after a pause, "How did you know?"

"I've been watching you," she answered. "Sit down!"

He obeyed slowly, not taking his eyes off her. Suddenly he burst out laughing. Then, still laughing, he threw his arms round her.

XI

THERE WAS nothing much on Vashti except the mining settlement, a city of oblong apartment blocks faced with the dusty reddish color of the iron-rich rocks so common in the equatorial zone and so pregnant with metal that the saving in refinement time more than outweighed the expense of shipping bulk cargoes off a planetary surface. The native vegetation had been cleared off about eighteen thousand square miles of rolling land—some of it was poisonous to human beings—and over the area it had occupied the mining machinery and the processing equipment had spread like another kind of plant, like vigorous weeds driving out competitors. As well as iron there was rutile; there were brine-beds left from a vanished sea which were an economic source of magnesium; there was some tungsten, a lot of antimony, there was gallium in such quantity that the eventual plans included factories for semiconductors and solid-state circuitry on the spot.

But that was about it, and Ogric sometimes had the feeling that the bleakness of the environment had left its stamp on Snutch, the general manager of the entire mining complex.

He was a much bigger man than Ogric, but he had the same kind of explosive manner, suggestive in his case of over-compensation for some real or imagined inferiority. He was a superb organizer, that was known; he could hold every last detail of the program for his mines in his head, and under his management production had expanded eight-fold in six years. But Ogric found him the kind of person about whom it was reassuring to tell oneself, "Well, you don't have to like him."

He came out to the ship directly after it landed, to take formal charge of his new employees, and sat in the captain's office sending snapping glances all around him.

Hoping to get his business over quickly, Ogric went straight to the point.

"Eight hundred for you this trip," he said. "Usual con-

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tracts—five-year, wide range of work listed, twenty thousand cash payment at end of term, and home world repatriation if required or another thousand in lieu."

"Gutter-sweepings," Snutch grunted. "I checked up on the place where you were getting 'em from. Have any trouble on the way?"

Ogric frowned. He'd hoped Snutch might forget to ask—but still, there it was. He bent sideways in his chair so that his voice would be caught by the hear-this microphone and called for the doctor who had attended Kazan. While waiting for him to arrive, he ran over the bald facts of the affair.

Snutch stared at him. When he had heard the story to its end, he threw up his hands.

"Not just gutter-sweepings!" he said. "But lunatics! How do I account to the government for production lost when they start worshipping the big excavators, or refuse to work a night shift because of the ghosts?"

"It's not like that at all," Ogric said stiffly. "After the first day or so we had no trouble. The only two you'll have to watch out for are this man Hego, who's as strong as they come and passed very high on the manual skills tests—he'll probably make an excavator driver—but who's not very bright, and Kazan himself. Ah, doctor; come in. We were just talking about the Kazan problem."

The doctor nodded to Snutch and took a chair. He laid a file of documents on his knees. He said, "It seems to be working itself out satisfactorily. You know I gave him a course of treatment for this hysterical state he was in?"

Ogric nodded. Snutch looked coldly attentive.

"I have the results of another set of tests I gave him afterwards," the doctor said. He took a sheet of paper from his file and handed it to Ogric. "Just glance down that. And note the times marked against the individual results."

Ogric obeyed, frowning. After reading the page carefully twice he passed it to Snutch and stared at the doctor.

"What have you got there?" he said. "A freak of nature?"

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" the doctor said with a smile. "I'd dearly like to take him home with us and run a full-scale investigation of him. His genetic make-up ought to be something out of the galaxy."

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Snutch snapped one finger against the paper he was holding, making a noise like a rubber band breaking. He said, "These results must be faked."

"I promise you they aren't," the doctor said. "I gave him the tests personally. You can check up for yourself, if you like. When we lifted, he couldn't read—except very haltingly, and about three or four words at a time. Names of streets and stores—that was his limit. And he couldn't sign his name. About halfway through the trip I advised him to learn. He got himself some lessons from a girl who'd taken an interest in him. She reads slowly, with a lot of subvocalization, but fairly well. He took two days to memorize the letters and a basic syllabary by the shape-technique. I checked him out of curiosity just before we broached atmosphere. Know what his reading speed is?"

"Whatever it is, he was faking before," Snutch snapped.

"It's eleven hundred and sixty a minute," the doctor said imperturbably. "I've been reading since I was five years old, and my speed has never topped nine hundred. And his retention is nearly eidetic. I'd dearly like to buy him out of his contract, I must say, and see where he's going to go from here."

Snutch's eyes narrowed barely perceptibly. He said, with an effort to hide his reluctance, "Well, I guess I'll have to take your word. According to what you're telling me, he's a magnitude one genius, is that right?"

"And going up," the doctor said, nodding.

"Well, we can do with some intelligence around here," Snutch said after a pause. He got to his feet. "I'll go and take my first look at what you've lumbered me with."

When he had gone, Ogric exchanged a wry glance with the doctor. He said, "You *didn't* fake those results, I suppose?"

"For the love of life, no!" The doctor stared at him. "Why do you think for a moment that I did?"

"Because I never saw anything like them before," Ogric growled. He tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. "Let me see them again." He reached for the sheet of paper.

"And you're not likely to again," the doctor said with unusual solemnity. "If he hadn't spent his life in the slums

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of Berak, if he'd had a proper education, that boy would be famous by now. I didn't mention it to Snutch, because I felt he might think I was overdoing it, but at the same time as I ran the reading test I gave him the literacy section of the intelligence tests, which I couldn't do previously, of course."

"And?" Ogric said, as though not eager for the answer.

"How do you measure the man who goes through the highest grade of test you have in four minutes under the theoretical limit?" said the doctor. On the last phrase his voice shook.

There was a pause. "Vocabulary?" Ogric said in a tone to suggest clutching at straws.

"I think he was getting at the words he didn't know by sheer logic—deducing the sense from the context or from resemblance to other words. When he came aboard I'd say his vocabulary was what you might expect—six to seven thousand. It's well over twenty now and probably rising continually." He hesitated. "You know something, Captain?" he said at last.

Ogric cocked an eyebrow.

"Next time we pass Vashti—maybe not until the time when we pick up the repatriates five years from now, but probably a lot sooner—I think you're going to find Kazan either running this place instead of Snutch, or dead."

"If you mean what I think you mean," Ogric began. The doctor cut the sentence short.

"Then you'd better not take me seriously," he said.

When he lined up to come aboard, nothing had suited Kazan's mood better than the mechanical business of processing the applicants. Now, during the disembarkation, he chafed and fretted. They were being handled by room-groups; consequently he and Clary moved up the line together.

"This is stupidly inefficient," he muttered to her when they had been out of the ship for twenty minutes. "What would it have cost them to signal ahead full details of everyone aboard? If they'd done it yesterday, people could have been ready now to split us up, jobs allotted." His voice trailed away as he frowned at the officious supervisors attending to

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the third or fourth group of workers. Trucks stood waiting on the edge of the landing-ground; there were ore tubs in the background, ugly squat ships whose only permanent feature was a drive-unit, the rest of the hull being manufactured crudely on the spot out of Vashti metal and broken up on arrival.

In five more minutes, under Clary's gaze—which when it was turned on him was becoming by marked degrees more adoring and worshipful every time—he had worked out in his mind a foolproof system for getting any number of new workers off a ship and into their jobs within fifteen minutes of landing. Since the idea had no practical application at the moment, he was about to dismiss it as a mere mental exercise.

Then he checked himself. There was something new about it for him. And yet something familiar. He sought about in his memory as an animal might snuff for the source of a tantalizing odor, and was startled to realize what he was reminded of: the early part of the day when he rescued Prince Luth, the time he had spent giving instructions as to how to dispose the forces available. At the time he hadn't given it a second thought—it was not so far removed from planning a gang raid on a store, which was part of his life in the Dyasthala.

Now it felt different. It had a different texture. Call it the idea of organizing people. Or events. Systematization. It would probably be easier with machines than people, naturally.

It was something he could do that he hadn't known about. That was the crucial point.

It gave him food for thought right up till the moment when the group to which he and Clary belonged was called down to the line of trucks, almost half of which had now filled up and moved off. There were men and women with lists here, most of them wearing drab, serviceable uniforms of a reddish-brown which matched the general tone of the landscape, noting and ticking off the individual workers and sending them to various trucks, presumably to different areas of the settlement near their allotted jobs.

As the first names were being called and checked, Clary

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suddenly squeezed his hand. She said, "What are we going to do if they split us up?"

"Argue," Kazan said shortly. His eyes were on the one man in the cluster of supervisors who was not dressed in the red-brown uniform, but in a black temperature suit. He was big, and carried himself well, but showed a definite nervousness in his expression and his restless hands.

"Clary, no other name, female," the bored voice of the checkman said. "Truck six, administrative and supervisory. Kazan, no other name, male, illiterate—"

"Literate," growled the big man in black. He looked Kazan up and down. "So you're the phenomenon!" he went on. "They tell me, that is."

Clary hesitated. For a moment the checkman was distracted by the big man's words and did not hurry her along. He said, "Uh—Manager Snutch!"

"What are we going to do with you?" the big man continued, ignoring the interruption. "From all accounts, you're too good for any jobs we have here. That right?"

As though the man's thoughts had been laid bare for him by some psychic scalpel, Kazan found he could see why Snutch was so heavily sarcastic, and why he was afraid. He had no wish to touch a raw spot in him. The checkman had called him manager, and he was clearly in authority, but it was plain that his personality was as sensitive as a broody bird's breast.

He said, "I'll do what I'm set to do, Manager."

Snutch seemed to turn the reply over as though looking for a cause of offence in it. Failing, he grunted something which sounded like, "I hope so!" He made to turn away.

"Manager Snutch!" the checkman said again. "He's down as illiterate—allotted to repair and maintenance training, truck twenty. Did you say that was wrong?"

There was a mutter of dismay from Clary. She moved back to Kazan's side and took his hand again. Snutch watched the movement, scowling, and then studied her from head to foot.

He said, "Where's the woman down for?"

The checkman told him.

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"I see," Snutch said heavily. "I see." And was going to turn away again, but paused.

"He's down for repair and maintenance," he said. "He goes to repair and maintenance, and we sort him out later if we have to."

Clary's fingers pressed Kazan's sharply. He cleared his throat. "Uh—Manager! I can read now, you know. I—"

"You just said you'd do what you were set to do," Snutch broke in. "Get to it."

"This isn't a jail, you know," one of the supervisors added reassuringly. "Okay, move it along there! Move it along!"

"Right!" Snutch said. "But it isn't paradise either, and it isn't a vacation resort. It's a place for getting things done. Move it along. You heard the order!"

Huddled together against the lonely strangeness of this wide-open world and its arching roof of sky, the other workers waiting to be allotted to their jobs listened and grew restive.

"We want to be together," Clary said obstinately. The supervisor who had spoken before, sighed and exchanged a glance with the checkman.

"Look!" he said. "This is what there is on Vashti—what you can see and damned little else!" He waved at the landscape around them. "Tomorrow you file an application with the accommodation bureau and we'll fix you up, right? Now you move and stop being in other people's way."

Kazan hesitated. He too shared Clary's automatic, Dyasthala-bred distrust of people in authority. But he could sense that this was a different kind of authority from that which he had known before. He said, "Go on, Clary. We'd better do as they say."

Snutch took a huge stride forward and confronted Kazan less than an arm's length distant. He said, "Better do as we say? Better than what? Now you get this through your head at once! You do what you're told or you break your contract and you go back in the gutter you came from, understood?"

Kazan gave him a level stare and said nothing. After a moment in which Snutch's face grew redder and redder a jolting fist came up and took him under the jaw. He reeled

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back, recovered his balance, and still said nothing. Out of the corner of his eye he saw that the checkman had caught Clary's arm to prevent her from going for Snutch.

He shrugged, rubbed his chin, and walked towards the truck.

XII

NOT A JAIL . . .

This was such a transparently obvious fact that Kazan could not understand why so many of the people working here felt otherwise. There were about six thousand personnel altogether: a couple of hundred forming a permanent administrative core, mostly career government servants from the parent world of Marduk, the rest labor recruited on a contract basis from a number of planets, ranging from highly skilled metallurgists and personnel experts to the least educated, least skilled of the workers who had come in with Ogric's ship. Merely to come into contact with people from so many different backgrounds was fascinating to Kazan, but there was something infinitely more significant still.

Not a jail, for him, in any least sense of the word. An incredible liberation.

He could see a very pale reflection of his own feelings in some of the other workers from Berak, especially among the people of the Dyasthala. It didn't apply so much to those who had come to Vashti because they had supported Luth's abortive revolt and wanted to escape the consequences. As nearly as he could put it into words, it was release from the naked problem of staying alive, warm and fed.

Most of the people of the Dyasthala had never worked regularly or been fed and clothed without having to beg or steal. Those who had been passed by the selectors at the Berak spaceport were those who innately disliked such an

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existence. It would obviously have been foolish to choose recruits who had a real psychological need for theft and violence.

Now they found themselves at a complete loss. Once, living had been a clock-round business for them, extending not only to the question of where the next meal was coming from, but as often as not to the question of where they could safely sleep the night. Free from the perennial pre-occupations which had faced them, they were now fed, clothed, housed and entertained in return for undemanding work. It was said that in ten years' time the Vashti mines would be fully automatized and would require only a token corps of engineers and surveyors to run them. Already the process had gone so far that the crying need was for labor to undertake the simple tasks which machines would take over completely in the first stage of automation. That was why Ogric had gone to Berak; unskilled labor was growing steadily rarer.

Not a jail, for the love of life!

Already aboard ship Kazan had begun to realize how much of his thinking had formerly been wasted on problems of survival. Already he had cast around for other things to apply himself to, and had fetched up with a crash against the blank wall of the ultimate simplicities which the greatest human thinkers of many worlds had tackled, and failed to answer. But new horizons were opening before him all the time, and it did not really seem to matter what he concerned himself with because so many things were offered.

First there was the work he was assigned to, doing repair and maintenance under the supervision of a tubby, pleasant man with a shiny bald head named Rureth. His life in the Dyasthala had brought him no nearer to contact with machinery in general than an occasional theft of a vehicle for a job. And that was an incidental, an accessory, which did not involve his interest.

Confronted with the machines they worked with here, he was jerked again into a new view of the universe in which he existed. They assigned a large number of illiterates and slow readers to the repair shops, because the tough, reliable equipment seldom needed more than cleaning, servicing and

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changing of parts which could be done by following colored diagrams. Most of the other workers were content with that. Kazan could not stop there. He wanted to know more; he had to discover the system behind the effects. This was an excavator which shifted and piled overburden at the rate of a ton a minute. What went on in the magnet-cased fusion chamber to produce so much power? This was a separator, which sorted streams of finely ground mineral dust according to its composition, into forty vertical storage tubes. How could it tell one kind of dust from another?

At first Rureth was irritated by Kazan's insistent questioning. Then he began to understand the reason behind it, and to think that he ought not to try and stop Kazan from improving himself. He sent him to the library.

The library, with its stock of microfilms and recordings, was a revelation to Kazan. When he had been spending almost every free moment there for a month, Rureth decided that something ought to be done about this young man so hungry for knowledge.

Not a jail, Clary thought dully. That was a joke, if you liked. It was all very well not to have to worry any more about where the next meal was coming from, where you were going to sleep tonight, but with that much taken out of her pattern of existence, what could she put in its place? She felt empty, and bored, and frustrated.

And as for Kazan, who seemed not to be worried, she was disgusted with him.

Her work was of no particular interest to her. It was simple clerking and maintenance of records. She could already read and write fairly well; she was taught to use a keyboard computer input, to select the appropriate program from the limited range required to administer the small settlement, and to interpret results. Mostly she had to handle dietary and leisure-time programming. The department was also responsible for accommodation, but that was a subject she would rather not think about now.

True enough, she wasn't deliberately kept away from Kazan. Although the mining area sprawled over large distances, the accommodations were concentrated for conven-

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ience together with the canteens, the leisure facilities and such ancillary establishments as the hospital and library. There was not even a need for internal transport in the dwelling area—everywhere was in easy walking distance, and helibuses were only necessary to transport workers to their jobs.

But she was separated from Kazan in another way, and a far more effective one.

They had allotted him to a room in the block where repair and maintenance staff lived, her to a room in the administrative staff's block. Remembering what the supervisor had said when they arrived, she inquired and found it was permissible to apply for shared accommodation; a lot of the staff formed more or less permanent arrangements together, because they were mostly here on two- or five-year contracts. Provided you showed up in time for the transport to work, she was told, no one would mind.

But her carefully worded application came back vetoed by Snutch.

In charge of records and programming, and therefore of her department, was a middle-aged woman called Lecia. She was well liked by her subordinates, though she was merciless with their shortcomings. Clary demanded of her why the application had been turned down. There was vacant accommodation available, she knew from the department's charts.

But Lecia merely said that she could not override a decision by Manager Snutch, and gave no further explanation.

According to the results of her examination on Berak, and the brief training course she had been through, Clary should have been a good and reliable worker. Her attention seemed to move somewhere away from her work after that. Lecia tried half a dozen times to shake her out of her apathy, but after a month she decided something was going to have to be done about the root problem.

This was not the separation which divided Clary from Kazan, though. It was worse than physical. It was as though since coming to Vashti Kazan had become another person as different again from what he had been on arrival as he then had been from the way he was when he left Berak.

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"Why did you let him hit you like that?" she demanded of him, thinking of Snutch's suddenly reddened face and unreasoning violence.

Kazan frowned. "I felt sorry for him," he said after a pause.

"What?"

"Yes, sorry for him. Don't you see that the only reason he could have for doing such a thing would be because he's not completely responsible? I've asked some people who've been here for a long time, and they tell me they think he's bitter about having come from Marduk to run things here. He feels that if he had stayed at home he might have got further ahead in life; he thinks he's traded his chance of fulfilling his main ambitions for a second-best job where he can rise no further."

"That's his fault, then!" Clary snapped. "I suppose he's vetoed the application for shared accommodation for the same reason!"

Kazan shrugged. He said, "I guess so."

"Don't you care?" Clary pleaded. "Don't you want to do something, even if it's only to complain about it? There isn't any regulation or anything to stop us being together—only Snutch's decision. And—and—wouldn't you like us to be together, Kazan?"

"But we can be," Kazan said, and she realized with a sinking heart that he had missed her point. "And you know as well as I do that if Snutch vetoed the application for some emotional reason he won't change his mind. Also I think he knows he made himself look foolish in front of his staff when he hit me for no good cause, and the way a twisted mind like that works, it seems to him that it was my fault he looked foolish. It's—inconceivable that he would change his mind simply because I asked him to."

"You know a hell of a lot about what goes on in Snutch's mind," Clary said sharply. "But you don't know a thing about what does on in mine, do you? Or do you just not care?"

She left him there before he could answer, hoping against hope that he would come after her. But he did not, and the next time they met it was like meeting a stranger, who

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could seemingly talk only about stellar processes and numbers and facts of the physical universe. But of these he talked with the excitement of a man who has made a miraculous discovery.

By instinct rather than conscious understanding, she saw then that Kazan as he had been for so short a time was lost to her. It was not his fault, and for all her reflex bitterness she could not make herself think that it was. She knew too well that he was being driven now by his own nature, and until the impetus was exhausted she could not hope to follow him. She could only wait until he was over the violence of this new enthusiasm for pure knowledge, and then—perhaps—he would remember that he had been grateful to her and had even liked her very much.

But the waiting was going to be intolerable, and there was no certainty that it was worthwhile.

XIII

THERE HAD been a fight between two of the workers in the repair shops over some contemptuous reference to the Dyasthala background of one of them; it took Rureth to Snutch's office to get the matter straightened out, and afterwards he used the opportunity to broach the other subject concerning him.

"One of that new batch of workers," he said thoughtfully, staring out of the big window which gave Snutch a general view of his nearer empire. He had heard the stories about what happened the day Ogric landed this batch; he was not at all surprised to see Snutch lift his head like a hunting animal snuffing a scent on the wind.

"Yes?" the manager said sharply.

Rureth settled his tubby body deep in his chair. He said, "Kazan. Know him?"

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Snutch gave a wary nod. "What about him?"

"You're wasting him on me," Rureth said. "What I needed was dumb oxen who could be taught to turn a wrench or weld a seam—not high-calibre engineers."

"He isn't one," Snutch said. "He's a slum-bred thief."

"But he is," Rureth corrected gently. "Who do you think is in charge of the shops while I'm over here with you?"

Snutch stared at him for a long moment. Then he slammed his open palm down on his desk. He said, "You have no business doing that, Rureth! Putting an unqualified novice in a position of responsibility—it's insane! Do you want an adverse entry on your service report?"

"I'm *telling* you," Rureth said patiently. "It's been a bit more than a month since I took him on. The library records show that he's requisitioned most of the texts on engineering and physical science that are available, and I can say from my own knowledge that he's learned them. It doesn't make sense to keep a man with learning ability of that order in the repair shops. Also I was told he was illiterate, and he's not. As you may have gathered."

"So what do you want me to do?" Snutch demanded. "Anyone would think that you'd be pleased. From what you say, you could sit back till the end of your contract and leave your work to him to handle!"

"I probably could," Rureth agreed. "But it wouldn't suit me, and I doubt if it would suit him. The suggestion I was going to make was that you transfer him around the settlement to as many different jobs as you can, for short periods, and then let him wind up on the planning staff. Maybe I'm being optimistic, because the only signs of original thinking he's shown so far have been in petty matters. But I prefer to back my hunch that he'd be a valuable planner, and he'd probably find ways of cutting the ten-year period to full automation."

"You said you'd had him for—how long?" Snutch commented sarcastically.

"Long enough to know when I'm on to a good thing," Rureth answered. "Another point: the rest of the workers from Berak regard him with almost superstitious awe. I doubt if it's rooted in sense, but it works all right. You ought

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to come out and see him handle them some time. It's hard to define, but he's got a sort of impatience with anything that's less than perfect, and what's more he can make it catching. Even to me.

"He'll gather round the four or five workers responsible for a particular job—say, replacing the magnet windings on an excavator's power unit—and spend ten or twenty minutes going over the diagrams with them. At the end of that time he'll have got the idea of what they're doing through their heads. Then they throw the diagrams away and they do the job. You see what I'm getting at? For years I've been plagued with knob-headed wrench-pushers dim enough to follow the diagrams by rote, which is all right but calls for unceasing supervision. When Kazan gets them working, they aren't just going through the motions—they know the reasons for the motions. And the difference is fantastic."

"Make your mind up!" Snutch rapped. "Either you want the job done like that, or you want dumb oxen. You've asked for both."

"I managed without him before he got here," Rureth said imperturbably. "I can manage again. But if he can do this in a repair shop he can probably do it for the mines as a whole, in which case he ought to be given the chance."

"Nonsense!" Snutch said with finality.

"You're the manager," Rureth shrugged. "Mark you, I guess I'm wasting my time anyway, because he's going to make his own chances. It'll just take him longer. In a year or two you're going to find him involved in planning anyway. It's his natural habitat. He'll make for it whether he knows about it or not."

"That's as may be," Snutch said. "But you keep your views to yourself."

"No," Rureth said. "Not without a good reason." The change that had come over his normally rather sleepy, casual voice was astonishing in that instant. It rang now like a beaten anvil. "And it's got to be better than the reason which people ascribe to you right now."

"What do you mean?" Snutch said slowly.

"It's good sense to make exceptional arrangements for an exceptional person," Rureth said. "Kazan is exceptional. But

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I was talking to Lecia yesterday evening, and I understand from her that for Kazan you won't even make ordinary arrangements."

"What was the idiot woman talking about?"

"That isn't fair to Lecia," Rureth said. "But let it pass. Kazan had a woman—Clary is the name—and she applied according to regulations for shared accommodation with him. You vetoed it. Any good reason?"

"That pair were troublemakers!" Snutch barked. "Didn't you hear what happened aboard Ogric's ship on the way here? A near-riot to start with, and tension from then on. This Clary threatened to make the workers welsh on their contracts, and blackmailed Ogric into giving her a bonus for not doing it, and as for Kazan—well, it was over him that the riot brewed!"

"I haven't had any trouble with Kazan," Rureth said. "And he's only been working directly under me. With others from Berak, yes, like that one who got involved in the fight this morning. If you want trouble from Kazan, you're going about it the right way."

Snutch leaped on that like a hungry animal on a scrap of meat. "You think he's contemplating trouble?" he said.

Rureth sighed and got to his feet. "No, but you are," he said. "You only have to wait until the rest of the workers from Berak start to feel the same way about Kazan as the ones in the repair shops already do. Like I said, they have this superstitious awe of him. But it's turning into a kind of reflected pride. They're thinking, 'This guy is from Berak, and he's hell with jets!'"

"If he tries whipping up a personality cult for himself among the workers, that can be dealt with," Snutch said, and compressed his lips whitely together.

"Listen!" Rureth said, leaning on both palms on the front of Snutch's desk. "You'd better hear this from me rather than someone else. Everybody knows—but *everybody*—you're ashamed of yourself for hitting him the way you did. It made you look like a fool, no denying. Pretty soon everybody will know about Kazan's talent. If you don't want the word to go around that you're scared of him, you'd better do something. Fast."

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"Get out before I throw you out," Snutch said between his teeth.

Snutch had not seen Kazan since the day of his arrival. In some strange way he was surprised when an ordinary enough young man entered his office, wearing the standard reddish-brown work uniform. What had he been expecting—superman? He wondered for a moment, then checked himself and wished he had not thought of the question. An instant later he caught himself looking for traces of a bruise under Kazan's chin.

He waved him to a seat.

"I've been hearing things about you," he said, leaving the phrase deliberately vague and pausing after it. Kazan showed no sign of preconception; he merely nodded.

"I understand," Snutch went on, "that you've been trying to create disaffection among the workers."

Kazan cocked his head. He said, "How's that, Manager?"

"You've been going around starting arguments between your people from Berak and the staff from Marduk and other places, about conditions of work, about living conditions—"

Kazan started to laugh. Snutch broke off, his face reddening. "What are you laughing at?" he barked.

"I'm ahead of you, Manager," Kazan said. "I guess all I can say is that whoever told you wasn't listening."

Snutch hesitated. There was an uncomfortable confidence in Kazan's voice, which reminded him of the younger man's expression that moment before he was so incredibly foolish as to hit him. He drew a deep breath.

"All right. Give me your version," he said.

"I'm not sure I can make it clear to you—"

"Are you hinting that I'm stupid?" Snutch cracked out, and instantly regretted it. What in the wyrd's name made him so sensitive to this calm young man? He recovered himself. "Go on."

"It's a question of background," Kazan said, ignoring the other's outburst. "It's like this. I come out of the Dyasthala in Berak. To me that's like being let out into fresh air, being here. I feel I'm awake for the first time. What I used to think of as impossible luxuries are commonplace here. And I'm getting to learn things I didn't know existed. It's like being

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born all over again. But there are people here—the people from Marduk especially—who think they're hard done by when they have to make do with what I call luxuries. They think they're trapped and enclosed here because they have a contract to work out on Vashti, when it's a liberation for me. I feel like"—he hesitated, hunting a comparison—"someone who's been in a cage all his life. Now I'm out of it. I want to know about outside life. That's all."

Snutch studied him with narrowed eyes. It sounded convincing. It made sense, if it was true that he was a frustrated genius out of the slums. And it implied that there wasn't much to fear from Kazan, if he was actively grateful to be on Vashti instead of in the Dyasthala.

Cautiously he said, "You like it here?"

"Better than the Dyasthala."

"Your work?"

"Fine. I don't have to spend too much time at it any more. Supervisor Rureth tells me I don't need any more training than I have already. So I have a surplus of leisure."

Without changing his expression, Snutch came to the alert. That was a problem he hadn't foreseen. To leave this fellow, about whom Rureth made such astonishing predictions, with time on his hands—that was probably what Rureth had meant about heading for trouble. Let someone intelligent and restive get bored, and the consequences might be dangerous.

He felt calm, and pleased that he had exorcised the irrational specter haunting him from their first encounter. He debated with himself for a moment. It looked as though he'd better do two things: arrange to keep Kazan occupied by making him undergo several more training courses, as Rureth had suggested, meantime watching him closely, and secondly try and eradicate any source of a grudge Kazan might bear against him, Snutch. Provided what he had said proved to be the truth, there wouldn't be any need to worry.

"Your girl put in for shared accommodation with you," Snutch said after he had made his decision. "I hear she's been miserable because I held over my approval. I wanted to make up my mind about you first. I'd heard you were talented. Supervisor Rureth's confirmed that now. So I have

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some plans for your future here. You can take your girl a couple of presents."

He had to avoid Kazan's emotionless gaze. He fumbled up an authorization pad from a drawer in his desk.

"I'll authorize your shared accommodation," he said, writing rapidly. "And I'll get you out of the repair shop. If you know all there is to know, you must be bored, hey?" He tried a friendly grin, and it failed. But Kazan smiled back, politely and mechanically.

"Shift you to the refinery," Snutch said, after a moment's thought: where is he likely to find the going toughest? Refinery work called for a keen understanding of chemistry; not even Kazan would hurry through his training there. "Give you something to chew on. Here you are."

He held out the two authorizations: the accommodation and the work-transfer. Kazan took them and stood up.

"Thanks very much," he said. "Is there anything else?"

It hadn't worked. The devil wasn't chained. "No," Snutch muttered. "No, that's all."

And as the door closed he knew grayly that small bribes and favors were so utterly useless that even big ones probably would fail as well.

He felt trapped.

XIV

HE FOUND Clary that evening in the leisure hall, the huge domed structure on the edge of the dwelling area where most of the staff passed part of their free time. Its mechanism allowed it to serve many purposes; tonight it was a place of pale blue and red mists, with half-glimpsed panoramas of landscapes on other worlds showing occasionally in its walls and small temporary rooms set off at random on its vast floor for music, dancing, drinking and conversation.

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Some time, Kazan thought, he must find out about the way it worked.

The mists were intangible—tricks played with light—and upset perspective in curious ways. Some of the young workers were playing hide-and-go-seek with screams of laughter, taking advantage of the visual effects which could make another person seem at one moment close at hand, the next infinitely far away.

Clary sat by herself, despondent, in a place where the mist was so strongly distorting that even people sitting next to one another, if they relied on their eyes, felt that they were swinging through vast unrelated orbits. Kazan loomed up to her; she caught sight of his face, saw it change as with recognition, and in the next instant had to wonder whether she had imagined it, for he seemed unreachably distant. Out of wisps of pale blue mist his hand shot up to touch her, its speed and trajectory magnified past possibility by the same wrong-end-of-telescope effect which made him appear remote.

Then he was standing before her, and with the additional information from the arm his hand was touching she knew he was really there. In a dull voice she greeted him.

"Here!" he said smiling, his head receding, his legs becoming treetop-tall, and all being twisted at once as he made to turn and sit beside her while taking a piece of paper from his front pocket. When he held the paper out to her the words twisted and writhed unreadably.

"What do you think of that?" he said after a pause.

"I can't read it," she said.

"Try again."

She frowned and forced her eyes to follow the wavering of the words; then she caught a clear glimpse of what it said, all the way down to the signature of Snutch at the bottom, and felt her heart turn over.

"Glad?" Kazan said. She considered that for a moment, and finally sighed and shrugged.

She said, "You're very clever indeed, Kazan. I'm sorry."

"For what?" Looming, his face showed puzzlement.

"For thinking you didn't want that, I guess. I might have known that if you did you'd fix it when the time was right."

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She found it an effort to speak to him; it was easier if she shut her eyes and abolished the swinging cycle of looming up and receding which dizzied her. The piece of paper was lifted gently from between her fingers, and she felt his hand brush her skin.

Convulsively, the instant following, she clasped at his wrist and held it tight, feeling by chance the pulse under her fingertips. She said, "Kazan, it's—well, it seems like a long time. I keep wanting to ask you as though you'd been off on a long trip—how are you, what's happened to you?"

She opened her eyes briefly, but he seemed terribly far away.

"I know," he said.

"Are you frightened any more?" That wasn't how she had meant to say it, but it was the thing she needed most to know.

After a small eternity he answered, "Yes. More than ever. But I don't think I would tell anyone else."

"The same thing?"

"The same thing? Oh, yes."

She turned to look at him, trying to fix him steady with her gaze by a sheer act of will. "But why, Kazan? I keep hearing that everything is wonderful for you, whatever you do turns to gold. Isn't that true?"

"I guess. But that's half the trouble, you see." He had his own eyes focused somewhere beyond her, looking at space. "Do you remember in the Dyasthala how if the day was gray and misty the ugliest things were veiled? Then, when the sun came out, and everything was harshly lit, you couldn't pretend any more. All the dirt showed for what it was. All the sick and twisted people could be seen. In my mind the sun has come out, Clary. I can't hide things from myself any more."

"What could you need to hide?" she demanded.

"I was thinking—and hoping—that I would come to terms with my memory. I hoped that as I learned more about myself and the way the mind works I would find that what troubled me was an illusion. Instead, it's become clearer, more solid, like a black rock. I did rescue Luth. Something that was not Kazan gave Kazan miraculous

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powers for a few short hours, and then—well, it named its price."

"But what has it cost you?" Clary cried. "When everyone's talking about how they envy you! Is there any single drawback from it—if it's true?"

"It makes me suffer," Kazan said after a pause.

"How, for the love of life?"

"This way." Kazan deliberated for a moment, as though lining up his words precisely. "The Kazan that was could have disregarded it. He could have fooled himself into thinking it really was an illusion, and if he could not have forgotten it he could at least have learned to live with it."

There was something almost eerie about the way he spoke of his former self in the third person, as though about someone altogether different. Clary shivered.

"But the Kazan that is," he went on, "can't fool himself. As my insight into my thinking grows clearer, I realize more and more that I'm not as I used to be. There is something in me which is different. True enough, I've learned how to absorb facts spongewise; my mind is keener—but for that very same reason the pain of knowing I am not *I* is keener too."

He broke off. While she was still hunting for a way to answer him, a change came over him. He gave a quick bitter laugh and shook his head.

"Still, I won't be past hope till the year and a day is up. A Vashti year? A Berak year? Or the year of some other unimaginable planet where the black thing comes from? I wonder. And at least Snutch has done me a great favor."

"That?" She gestured hopefully at the paper in his hand, and her own arm seemed to her to be swinging through an arc of many miles as the distorting mirage effect took hold of it.

"So long as I can find new things to distract me," Kazan said, not appearing to notice, "it won't be unendurable. He's moving me to refinery work; I guess after that he can be persuaded to shift me again, and again, so I hope I won't have time to think too much. I haven't told anyone else about this, Clary. I'm too exposed."

"I don't understand," she said in a dead voice.

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"I can't help myself now, I must do everything as well as I possibly can, and too many things I find I can do so well I terrify myself. So far I've been lucky. People have taken a reflected pride in it. But I could make one wrong step, and they'd be jealous. Some of them might remember what Hego said on the ship. And I could be destroyed."

"Nonsense," she said automatically.

"You know it's not. If I frighten myself, how can I keep from frightening others?"

"You don't frighten me," Clary said. "I think you must be going through hell."

"I know that," Kazan replied. "I—you know something? I never thought I'd be so grateful just to have someone who was not afraid of me. I don't like it! I *hate* it! And that's another way I've changed—Kazan that was knew that Bryda was afraid of him, Hego was afraid of him, perhaps in the end even Yarco and Luth as well, and that made him proud. But now, to see the fear in Snutch's eyes—that's horrible."

"Snutch?" she said.

At that moment there was a twisting of the mist and a sudden clear patch appeared. In the middle of it, only an arm's reach away from where they were sitting, they saw two of the young people who were playing their seeking game among the mirages—a husky youth with a laughing face and a tawny-skinned girl with eyes like a startled deer. He had just caught her by the arm and was swinging her round to kiss her when the mist lifted. Together they turned, startled, on seeing Clary and Kazan, and were about to speak when a sort of intangible tunnel gathered about them and without moving they were whisked away into distant isolation.

"Yes," Kazan said.

At first she thought it couldn't be like that; then she began to learn how true Kazan's gloomy analysis had been. As he was shifted like a chess piece across the board of the mining settlement, she saw the aura of disturbance follow him. This man—it equated to in words—this man is a strange phenomenon. Unpredictable. Dangerous.

The settlement was not small enough to be a microcosm of

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frictions, and it was organized on a highly efficient basis. But that organization depended on predictability; Kazan was a wild factor now. Not all his immediate superiors reacted to him as Rureth had done. Some shared Snutch's emotional response, and tried to pin him down, but that was like trying to dam a river with spadefuls of soil; behind the obstacle the water still flowed, and sooner or later dug itself another channel.

Aside from Clary herself, there were very few people in the settlement who were at all close to Kazan. Rureth was one; he took a diffuse paternal interest in Kazan's progress because he had been the first to diagnose his probable development. Another was Jeldine, the rather gloomy, withdrawn woman who acted as educational supervisor for the workers and incidentally as librarian; a spark caught from Kazan's blazing need for knowledge started a fitful glare in her mind also, and she helped him in several small ways.

But it was on Clary that the burden mainly fell. She had not foreseen that it was going to be a burden; when she made the discovery, it was too late to do anything about it. Helpless, she was trailed along behind Kazan, fascinated by the firework sparkle of his mind, the paradoxical contrast between his much-envied gifts and the torturing pain of the self-knowledge they had brought him.

For days or weeks together he could lose himself, either in new work or a new problem of a philosophical kind; then the darkness would close again, and he would question her fiercely—sometimes all through one night—about the way she remembered her own past, about her reactions and attitudes which he needed to compare with his own.

It became still worse as the year and a day period which he so greatly feared drew to its close. Then the black devil in his past seemed to become more and more real to him; once he spent many hours trying to recreate from memory the face of the half-noticed conjurer, the black-clad man with the black skullcap who had been hired by Bryda. Also the various kinds of work to which he was successively transferred seemed to involve him less and less. His need to know narrowed down to a single focus, and when he was not consulting all the available literature he was sitting in

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isolated corners away from interruption, his eyes closed and sometimes with sweat on his face, as he struggled to bring up from memory the one thing from the short but crucial period of his life when he was involved with Bryda which remained unclear to him: the way in which he had molded air into solidity with a few passes of his hands.

"If I could only do it again, I'd know!" he would say to Clary.

To which she could only reply, "But since you can't, why doesn't that prove the contrary?"

He would shake his head.

"If it would make me do something extraordinary! So that I knew I was 'serving' it! But I can't tell if I'm serving it, or if I'm being myself; I only know I've changed, and the uncertainty is intolerable!"

It was torment. Clary knew that merely from seeing the haunted expression in his eyes. But it was of such unimaginable subtlety that she could not reach out to him, there where it hurt him, and give him comfort. She wondered how long she could endure this, and what would happen to Kazan when the time finally ran out.

Wondering about what would happen to him was the worst of all.

XV

THE EQUABLE climatic curve of Vashti's long year dipped by degrees towards its winter. The morning of the day when Kazan was transferred yet again—to the outward shipping complex—was gray and overcast, with occasional spitting rain and a cool fitful wind. He was to work under Rureth again; the former manager of the shipping complex had worked out his contract, and Rureth had been transferred and upgraded about two months before.

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Kazan walked slowly in the direction of his office. There was always a slight smell of sulfur in the air hereabouts, and the peculiar baked tang of red-hot metal cooling. This was the key point of all the mining settlement's industry, lying between the refining complex and the spaceship landing ground. On one side metal came in, some piped as white-hot liquid, but mostly as a suspension of fine particles in a wet flurry, or dancing on a stream of air. The metal was sintered, or cast and stamped, and from it were formed the ribs and plates of the squat ships nicknamed ore tubs. The assembly line for these was the biggest single unit of the complex.

The normal output was a ship every four to six days, depending on whether it was to carry a cargo of crude metal, in which case it needed only to be approximately hull-tight and strong enough to stand the strain of lifting to orbit on its own, prefabricated power unit—or whether it was to carry semiconductor material, in which case it required somewhat more elaborate preparation. There were huge parabolic-roofed loading bays beyond the assembly shops, down which the ovoid bulk of the hull slid on rails; finally, complete with cargo and preprogramed electronic controls, it emerged into the open and was fired to space.

After that it ceased to concern the staff of the mining settlement; masterships came from Marduk, gathered together anything up to eight of the crude ore tubs, and flew them back to the parent world. While orbiting, the power units of the tubs stored solar energy; consequently the cost of shipment was comparatively small. It was a very ingenious system, and Kazan had made all the inquiries about it that he wanted to some time ago.

Because the slightest hitch in the shipping complex could make the operation of the entire mining settlement uneconomic, it was here that automation had progressed furthest. Kazan paused at a point from which he could look right down the loading bays into the assembly shop beyond, to watch for a moment as the current ship rode up the electric monopole rails for final inspection.

On rotating quadrants sonar probes and low-intensity radiation sources scanned the hull for flaws; when one was

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found, as now happened, a gentle alarm bell rang and a splash of paint was applied automatically to the weak seam. From galleries under the arching roof men rode down on jointed pillars; each was strapped to a chairlike cradle and wore an airmask and goggles of dark pressure-glass. With deft movements they touched their welders to the flaws and pressurized liquid metal sealed them up.

Looking carefully to one side of the brilliant beads of light from the welders, Kazan went forward. One of the men nearest him glanced up, blind for a moment because of his goggles, and then pushed the goggles aside.

It was a few seconds before Kazan recognized the upper part of the face so exposed, with the air mask still hiding the nose and mouth. It was Hego.

He had not seen Hego for a long time except from a distance; he did not know if this was because Hego still kept his superstitious fear of him, or whether he merely felt that he had made himself ridiculous by his behavior aboard the ship which had brought them. He would have thought the second the more likely—except that Hego hardly seemed intelligent enough to worry about fine points of embarrassment. Because he knew that among the other workers from Berak there was little trace remaining of their original fear. The passage of months, combined with the comparative security and freedom from worry which they now enjoyed, had dimmed their first startled reaction; moreover they had come into contact with people from other worlds whose skepticism about devils and men back from the dead had proved contagious.

Kazan gave a wary nod and would have passed by, but Hego, after a brief hesitation, jerked the controls of his cradle and swung through the air on the jointed pillar bearing it. He brought himself to a point directly in front of Kazan, and poised in the air where he could look down on him. With a jerky movement he dropped his air mask on his chest, then hung his welder on its hook beside the cradle he sat in.

"Where do you think you're going?" he said thickly.

"I work here," Kazan said. "As of today."

"So we heard," Hego agreed. "And we decided we didn't want you. Do you understand me?"

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"I'll take my instructions from Supervisor Rureth," Kazan returned peaceably. "Not from you."

"You talk big," Hego said. He *was* afraid; it showed in the way he could not quite make his eyes stay still when he looked at Kazan. "I been wanting for a long time to find out if you really can't be killed—understand me? So have a lot of others here in this shop. Maybe you want to find it out too. Okay! Come right in! You'll get your chance—or you'll turn around smart and go beg Snutch to shift you somewhere else."

Beside them now the other workers were pulling back on their jointed pillars, and the hull was beginning to slide towards the loading bay. From up near the arching roof a voice boomed, immensely amplified.

"Hego! What are you playing at?"

They glanced up together and saw the tubby figure of Rureth on the under-roof gallery, a microphone on an extension arm held to his face. Hego spat sidelong.

"Come to give you your instructions!" he said. "Or to take some from you, maybe. We heard how you move in wherever you go and start pretending to run things. Well, we don't want it here, get me? You sold out to a devil—it's bad enough having you on the same planet, but by the wyrd we won't have you under the same roof!"

"Oh, for the love of life!" Kazan said wearily, and made to walk by. With a quick twitch on the controls of his cradle, Hego was in front of him again. He put one hand to his welder and made to lift it from its hook.

"The devil pulled you out of the lake of monsters," he said. "Want to see if he can pull you out from under me?"

He snatched the welder up and jammed the power-switch to maximum, slapping his goggles back over his eyes. Kazan had to cry out with the shock as the full power glare of the tool—almost as bright as the naked sun—seared into his eyes.

For a moment he thought Hego had gone totally insane, and was going to spear him with the welder's arc; he could see nothing beyond the dazzling afterimage. Then he realized that it was only the afterimage now—the welder had been shut off—and out of the side of his eyes he could see what

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had saved him. Rureth had clambered into a vacant cradle and swung down from the gallery, just in time to break Hego's power supply by opening the main switch mounted behind him where the welder lead was attached to the cradle.

The fire of fury in Rureth's eyes was nearly as bright as the extinguished arc as he confronted Hego. His voice crackled with the same blistering anger.

"Maniac!" he barked. "Moron! Blockhead, clubfooted, ham-handed, blubber-lipped, superstitious *imbecile*! I've had enough of your lunatic gabble about devils! You'd have killed Kazan if I hadn't cut the power in the nick of time—and that's the finish as far as you're concerned. I'm sick of you, and everyone on Vashti is sick of you. How are you, Kazan?" he added from the side of his mouth, not moving his eyes.

"Eyes are a bit sore," Kazan said, breathing heavily. "I guess I have you to thank that I still have eyes at all."

By now the completed hull had slid all the way into the loading bays, and beyond the inspection shop the ribs of the next in line could be seen waiting for the automatic transporters to fit the hull-plates. Some of the other workers who had swung down from the gallery at the same time as Hego had returned there, but two or three of them had seen Rureth come down and had waited to find out if there was trouble.

To them, Rureth now turned. Strapped in his cradle and with the power turned off where he could not get at it, Hego could only fume and snarl.

"Get this savage up on the gallery!" Rureth ordered. "Manager Snutch is due here in a few minutes' time. I'm going to have him put Hego in for psychiatric reorientation. If I hadn't managed to cut his power he'd have burned this guy alive with his welder. Did you see it, you?"

He flung his arm out commandingly at the nearest of the other workers. Out of memory Kazan conjured the fact that he had seen this man before aboard Ogric's ship. He had been one of the previous occupants of the cabin where Kazan was assigned, and had been among the first to join the rush to get out.

The man exchanged glances with his companions, and

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then shot a hating glare at Kazan. It lasted only a second; then he was smiling easily.

"Why, no, supervisor!" he said. "I didn't see a thing. Nor did either of these others—*did you?*" he finished.

Together they shook their heads. For a moment Rureth was taken aback.

"Now see here, Dorsek!" he began.

The worker cut him short with a gesture of phony meekness. He said, "We had our dark goggles down, Supervisor!"

Rureth drew a deep breath, held it, let it out under control to calm himself. In a disgusted tone he said, "I get. I get. But you can see well enough now, and I'm ordering you to get Hego back on the gallery. Ride him up there with your own cradles, and anyone who turns the power back on for him goes under managerial detention and forfeits his contract. Is that clear?"

"Quite clear," Dorsek said with irony, and waved to his companions to close in on Hego and pull his cradle back up to the gallery. The dead power-joints of the pillar on which it rode hissed and sucked complainingly.

"Climb on the back of my cradle," Rureth said to Kazan when he was sure Dorsek was obeying him. "I'll lift you up the top. Did Hego start it? I guess I'd better settle that before Snutch hears the facts."

Awkwardly, having to move more by touch than by sight, Kazan clambered on the flat footrests behind Rureth's cradle. He said, "He just told me that they—whoever that might be—didn't want me under the same roof. Does he give you much trouble?"

"Pretty often," Rureth said, activating his controls. The floor of the inspection shop fled dizzily away beneath them. "He's so stupid he can barely count; welding is the most complicated job you can trust him with, and that's three-quarters automatic. All he needs to know is which button to press on his welder, and the rest is done for him. There's a sort of gang of them, though, with him and Dorsek at the head—guys from Berak who got the thin end of this prince's revolution which I gather you were tied up in somehow."

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"Is that what's behind it?" Kazan said. "Or do they believe what Hego says about devils?"

The cradle rocked and hovered as Rureth brought it tidily up to the edge of the gallery.

"Is anybody that stupid, to really believe in devils?" Rureth said.

There was a short pause. Then, sounding as though he was a long, long way away, Kazan said, "I guess some people must be. I have to."

As he scrambled out of his seat, Rureth stared at Kazan.

"Are you as crazy as he is?" he demanded.

"Could be," Kazan said. "The year and a day runs out on me any time now, so I'm just about due to find out."

"What?"

"Nothing," Kazan said. "Give me a hand onto the gallery, will you? I can still barely see."

When Rureth seized him by the arm to guide him over the narrow gap between the cradle and the gallery, he was astonished to find that he was shaking violently.

XVI

WHEN SNUTCH arrived he was looking harassed. He had come up through the shops and spoken to one or two of the foremen on the floor, and his first remarks to Rureth were brusque.

"What's going on?" he demanded. "You have three men pulled out of the inspection team, and that's no joke at this of all times. There's a big demand for magnesium at home right now and they want an eight-ship load for the master that's coming in next week, and the stuff is piling up in the loading bay stores!"

Rureth told him, crisply and with emphasis, while Hego, Dorsek and one of the other workers stood by in the back-

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ground with tolerant expressions. Kazan listened passively. He wished Rureth hadn't put that question about devils to him.

His eyes hurt, and there was a blur in the middle of his field of vision which had replaced the long-lasting afterimage.

When Rureth had finished, Snutch turned to Kazan, scowling. He said, "Is that true? Did he try to kill you with his welder?"

"I can't say what was in his mind," Kazan said wearily. "I know he said he didn't want me under the same roof."

"Hego?" Snutch said, turning.

"He's sold to a devil," Hego said. "He's bad. You can feel he's bad, just by being close to him. If you want work to go on in this shop, you'll get rid of him."

"Devils!" Snutch said. "Comet-gas! I'm not going to pay you the compliment of taking that garbage seriously! Rureth, put 'em back on the floor. There's work to be done."

"Not Hego," Rureth said.

There was a frozen silence. Snutch's face went red. He said, at last, "Are you presuming to question what I say?"

"Where Hego is concerned, yes," Rureth snapped. "I saw him attack Kazan with a welder. He came within an inch of murder. Men I'll work with. Wild animals I will not. Hego belongs in the psychiatric ward of the hospital, undergoing massive personality repair. I won't have him under my responsibility one day longer. The rest is up to you. But I tell you this! If he does kill somebody, I'll see to it that you're paid for disregarding my warning."

"You two, get back to work," Snutch said in a low voice, pointing at Dorsek and his companion. They obeyed; the moment the door had closed behind them, he went on, "I'll go along with you this far, Rureth; I'll get a doctor's report on Hego. If it confirms what you say, all right. Otherwise I'll break you. Two can make threats, and I'm better able to see them fulfilled—clear?"

Rureth returned his gaze steadily, but said nothing.

"As for you, Kazan!" Snutch barked, rounding on him. "I feel just about as sick of you as Rureth says he is of Hego! You can't be in here two minutes without trouble brewing and men are being dragged off the production line!"

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Kazan also said nothing. It was sheer self-defense that was driving Snutch to try and shift the blame for Rureth out-facing him. You couldn't do anything about that.

Snutch stormed to the communicator on Rureth's desk and made the promised call to the hospital. The threat of psychiatric examination seemed to have cowed Hego for the moment; he raised no objection when Snutch ordered him to report to the doctor.

"Think you can keep things under control now, Rureth?" Snutch demanded sarcastically.

"With Hego out of the way, no problems," Rureth answered.

"Glad to hear it," Snutch retorted. "If you'd been on top of your job, you'd have known this was likely to happen and you'd have taken some action in advance." He jerked his head in Kazan's direction. "He's all yours—make the best of him. I remember it was you who first told me was supposed to be an all-around genius. Let's see you get matching results."

He marched out. After a long pause, Kazan stirred on his chair.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I'm a source of continual headaches and it isn't only Snutch who gets them."

"Him!" Rureth said violently. "He's scared of you, for the love of life, and for no saner reason than Hego is! I wish I could figure out what goes on inside his head."

He dropped into his chair and studied Kazan across his desk.

"Not that you've made an auspicious start in this place," he went on. "Snutch is damned right. I should have known what Hego's reaction was apt to be, crazy or not." An idea seemed to strike him. "And speaking of crazy!" he said. "What was that you were saying as you got up on the gallery, about you believing in devils? Or was my hearing playing me tricks?"

Kazan shrugged and forced a smile. Rureth didn't press him, being glad to let the matter slip. He said when he had waited for, and not had, a reply, "But what the hell I'm to do with you, I just don't know. I was going to give you the straight training course, condensed to fit you. But that means

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you go to work on manual jobs first. The wyrd knows what would happen if I set you alongside Dorsek, for example—and it'd be still worse if you ever tried to give him orders."

The communicator signaled on his desk. He answered it, listened for a moment, and said crisply, "On my way!"

He got to his feet. "Trouble everywhere today!" he said. "Now there's a hitch in hull-plate supply. There's a die broken on number four press. Well, I guess that solves one problem, though. That's where you go to work."

It had never been like this, Kazan thought. He felt as if he had been beaten steadily from head to foot all day with clubs; the sheer nervous tension had exhausted him and dulled his mind.

It would be good if he could stop. It would be good to find peace.

With the clangor of the shift-end bell in his ears, he walked moodily out of the shipping complex in a direction opposite from that of most of the other workers, who were headed for the point at which the helibuses waited to return them to the dwelling area. It was more than two miles across reddish dusty ground if you went on foot, but Kazan thought he would rather walk. Half an hour's silent reflection would be a comfort.

Instead of following the ordinary route, therefore, he went out past the exterior of the loading bays and for a short distance along the edge of the spaceport. There wasn't much to the port; only a cluster of half a dozen ship cradles and the rails on which the ore tubs slid after loading to wait their turn to be fired into space, and a group of reddish, low-built blockhouses with narrow-beam antennae on their roofs, which sufficed for the control staff. The concrete of the field was dusty too. The spitting rain of this morning had ended by noon, and a steady wind had dried up behind it.

Often there were two or sometimes as many as four ore tubs lined up, when the shipping complex somehow got slightly ahead of schedule—perhaps if an exceptionally pure vein of ore was struck and refinery time was reduced. This evening there was only one, the ship which had been completed and inspected this morning.

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Ugly things, Kazan thought. Nothing but a roughly finished ovoid, made of stamped plates over coarse strong ribs, and full of dust. There was nothing about them not dictated by absolute necessity; they were simply a means of getting a bulk of metal out of Vashti's atmosphere. You could hardly even call them ships, because the only thing that made them more than inert metal lumps was the power unit which socketed home in a tunnel down the long axis of the ellipsoid, and that was strictly detachable; before the master ship collected its cargo and departed that power unit would be removed and returned by itself to crash in the desert a few miles away. Then it would serve to hoist another lump of metal into space.

Like insects, a small group of the control staff swarmed over the ore tub on its rails. There was clearly going to be a firing shortly. It occurred to Kazan that he had picked a bad time to walk in the open—a firing was noisy, and there was always a good deal of stray energy owing to the virtually pure metal structure of the ore tubs, which sometimes caused lightning although they usually sprayed the hull with water from fog-nozzles to carry away the greater part of the charge as the power unit warmed up.

Yes; they were moving away from the hull now, and the monopole motor on which the ship rode was driving it forward into the nearest ship's cradle. Kazan cursed. He had been looking forward to a slow stroll home, and time to think. Now, if he wanted to live, he would have to start running, or risk yet more dislike from the control staff this time. They would have to hold back the firing till he was off the field.

He was not absolutely certain, he found, that he did want to live. But if he stayed here, they would send out transport and carry him away.

He compromised by walking fast. By the time the wail of the firing siren reached him, he knew he was well past the danger zone. Another five minutes, and he would be in the dwelling area. He paused and turned to watch the ore tub go up.

A sudden demand for magnesium, Snutch had said. This

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would be a light lift, then, taking only a few minutes, compared to one containing the more usual heavier metals.

Faintly he could hear the complaints of the cradle's plungers as they pushed the blunt nose of the ore tub up towards the correct angle of ascent; the thrust from the power unit on the centerline was strictly longitudinal. There were no minor adjustments after firing, when the trajectory became purely ballistic.

A second blast from the siren. Twilight was closing in, but when they turned on the water-fog it could be clearly seen how the spray veiled the cradle and the hull resting on it. A few random sparks struck, but Kazan was too far away for them to be dazzling.

Just as well, he thought. His retinas had had enough punishment for one day.

There followed the usual pause while they scanned the area over which the ore tub would travel, making sure there were no obstructions such as unscheduled helibuses, and more sparks struck through the water-fog. And the final, prolonged siren howl announced the actual firing.

Afterwards Kazan could remember what happened in his mind during the next half-minute or so. But at the time he was consciously aware only of external things.

First, the awkward, wobbling rise of the ore tub from the cradle. The moment it came clear of the water-fog it was alive with ungrounded energies, and some of them converted into visible frequencies, making the hull glow faintly blue.

Then the noise, of course, like a lunatic drummer hammering his instrument as though trying to drive the sticks through the heads. It was always like that when an ore tub took off. There were a dozen resonances in the best of them, and this was not one of the best.

Then the calamity.

Something seemed to give at the nose of the hull. A brilliant, white-hot glare appeared. The acceleration of the whole which had previously been steady seemed to be divided—part of the glowing object at the nose, and a much smaller part to the remainder. The hull twisted. By now it was a thousand feet up. The twist became a spin. The forces act-

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ing on the hull seemed to go insane, and drove it sidewise and still, for a short distance, upwards. But the sidewise component mattered.

It was arcing towards Kazan, towards the dwelling area where the workers from the outlying areas were now returning for the night; the power unit had broken through the nose; there was a continuous spark between the power unit and the hull hot enough to have fired the powdered cargo.

Like a firework built by a lunatic giant, the ore tub nosed down on the settlement of six thousand people, showering burning liquid magnesium over an area of ten square miles, a fountain of dazzling death.

It was then that Kazan knew two things: first, that it was his fault, for he had interrupted Hego as he was about to close a flaw in that same hull which was breaking apart above him, and second, that he did not really want to die.

A chunk of solid white magnesium oxide struck the concrete a yard from him and splashed; it was still fiercely hot, and specks stung his exposed hands and face. As though the momentary pain had been a trigger, Kazan remembered how to solidify air.

And the ore tub, and the thousands of tons of incandescent magnesium pouring from its riven sides, fell on a hard invisible nothing a hundred feet above the settlement and roofed it over with a sky of fire.

He had been slow. He had not stopped it all from falling in the dwelling area—only most of it. There were screams. There were fires starting in the leisure hall and on some of the dwelling blocks. But at least when it exploded it would—

It exploded, and the world went black around him.

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XVII

IT WAS NIGHTMARE made flesh from that moment on. For a long time the sea of fire overhead glared down so brilliantly eyes could barely be kept open; those who fought to rescue victims trapped in the leisure hall and the worst hit of the apartment blocks had to improvise antiglare filters from loose-mesh cloth, or use one eye only and squint narrowly between two fingers, keeping the other eye closed.

The heat was terrible. It was as though the whole sky had suddenly been filled with suns.

Wherever the incandescent magnesium had fallen, there was appalling destruction. Some of the first spurts from the ore tub as it broke apart had created liquid drops of the metal fully twenty pounds in weight, and wherever they fell on steel girders—mostly on the roof of the leisure hall—they melted them through. The girders bowed, caved, broke, spilling the roof on the ground below.

Aside from the leisure hall, the buildings worst affected were food storage warehouses set a short distance back from the dwelling area, and the shipping complex. A veritable river of liquid magnesium poured off the incredible barrier in the air and flooded over the loading bay where yet more magnesium was in store. There were explosions which sent gouts of white death soaring for miles across the countryside.

After the heat, as after a nuclear explosion, the rain that had been poised ready to fall in the air came gushing down.

A crust of white insoluble magnesium oxide formed over the settlement and darkness followed, almost less bearable than the hideous glare which had gone before. Most of the power was out, and people had to work in the ruins by hand-lights. There was effectively no disease among the workers on Vashti—the land was sterile for many miles around—and the resources of the medical staff were only designed to cope with the occasional injury and with the known allergies which sometimes resulted from contact with native vegetation.

Where fats remained in the food warehouses they were

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pillaged to provide emergency burn dressings; the deaths were amazingly few, but the casualties numbered more than half the total population, from sprains and scratches to third-degree burns and broken limbs.

Through an inferno of collapsing walls and moaning victims Kazan walked like an unseeing ghost. He kept thinking of the fear which was to him a certainty—that when Hego turned aside from his work, he had left unrepaired a flaw in the hull of the ore tub, and no one had remembered the fact in the confusion following his attack on Kazan.

True enough. "He's bad. You can feel he's bad just by being close to him." True enough. This happens; without intention, simply by Kazan being Kazan.

Was this the purpose of the devil that possessed him? A devil was said to hail from a place of torment; this was a place of torment now. He was too dazed to wonder why—if pain and destruction were intended—he had suddenly regained the power to make air solid, and so saved the settlement from total obliteration.

All he could think of was that this happened because he was here.

He came to what he recognized as his own apartment block; a small fire burned at one end, allowed to remain alight so that rescue workers could see to carry casualties to the emergency hospital set up in front of the building, but carefully watched by grim-faced men with hoses ready to damp it down when there was no more need for it. Squatting or lying hopeless on blankets were more than a hundred injured people, some with terrible burns. He walked between them, scarcely seeing.

"Kazan!" a shrill voice called to him. "Kazan!"

He turned slowly, and saw Clary rising from beside one of the casualties, a roll of bandage in her hand. She was dusty from head to foot and her shirt was ripped jaggedly from the left shoulder down, but she moved smoothly as she hurried towards him. He did not move when she flung her arms around him.

"Kazan, you're safe!" she sobbed. "I was afraid—I"

"Of course I'm safe," Kazan said in a gravelly voice. "It was my doing. What do you expect?"

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"What did you say?" Disbelieving, she drew back from him. A pace or two distant two men who had paused to rest and wipe their faces after carrying a casualty to join the rest exchanged glances and moved closer. Clary read menace in their faces and tried to pull Kazan away, but he was like a wooden dummy.

"What happened?" the nearer of the men said. "I still don't know what happened."

"Did you see it?" his companion demanded of Kazan.

"I saw it," Kazan said. "The ore tub. The power unit broke loose. It spilled its cargo of magnesium over the settlement."

"Everyone knows that by now!" Clary said, still trying to make Kazan move away.

"Yeah!" the first speaker said. "What held it up? That's what I want to know!" He gestured at the opaque roof closing in the settlement. "It's up there! Hot as blazes—like the sun falling down!"

"Don't worry what caused it—just be glad!" his companion contradicted. "Aren't things bad enough? Look at these poor devils half-roasted on the ground here! Look at the buildings! Look at the whole place. It's a shambles!"

Another man, husky, dirty, moving tiredly, helped a limping woman to a place on the roadway where a doctor was at work, and turned to go. He caught sight of Kazan and the two men interrogating him, and came suddenly alert. He strode over.

"Kazan!" he said. "I'd hoped something fell on you! We could spare you well enough, but I'll lay you aren't even scratched!"

Dorsek, Kazan realized dully. He said, "I—I don't know. I guess I'm okay. But by the wyrds I wish something had fallen on me."

"Do you now?" Dorsek said softly. "I wonder why that is."

And in the same moment came Clary's despairing cry, "Kazan! Don't listen to him—he's suffering from shock!"

"You keep quiet!" Dorsek snapped, round on her. "I want to hear this. Go on, Kazan—bring it up!"

"Hego," Kazan said thickly. "The seam he was going to

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plug when I came this morning. He didn't do it, and nobody realized."

Dorsek's face twisted into an ugly mask of rage. He said, "Why, you miserable sniveling insect! Aren't you satisfied yet with what you've done to Hego? You aren't going to get away with this! You aren't going to unload the blame that easily! It happened because you're here, and we knew it was going to happen and we tried to stop it. If you'd kept your contagious nose out of that inspection shop then from what you just said it would never have happened and—"

"Stop him!" Clary shrieked, and the two puzzled men standing by made to grab Dorsek as he lunged forward, but they were too slow. Kazan made no attempt to avoid the blow. The fist took him full in the face, and he toppled and slid to the ground, the last sound in his ears being the voice of Clary crying his name.

Eyes red-rimmed, Snutch looked around the assembled remnants of his senior staff. Some of them were wearing surgical dressings, and all of them were dirty and weary. The only light came from a hand lamp on the table in the middle of the room, which gave each of them a vast shadow like a carrion-eating bird poised with folded wings on the wall behind.

"What in the name of the wyrd is it?" he said.

They all knew what he meant, and exchanged worried glances. For lack of the chief scientist—unconscious for the past several hours—Rureth spoke up.

"A force field, I guess," he said. "I know force fields are supposed to be impossible. But that's one. There's an invisible dome over the settlement. We mapped it." He took a rolled paper from his front pocket and threw it down on the table; several people craned to stare at the circular red line inscribed on the outline of the settlement.

"Far as we can tell, there isn't anything there but air," Rureth went on, bowing his head to rub his eyes and then shaking back his thin fringe of hair. "It's fairly elastic, but if you hit it with a heavy hammer it transmits force instead of absorbing it. It's coated on the outside with a layer of magnesium oxide which in places is feet in thickness. I've

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got a couple of dozen men working on the thin areas. We've managed to crack loose a few sheets of the crust and we won't have to worry about ventilation because air diffuses through the field. Or whatever you like to call it."

"What shape is it?" Snutch demanded.

"Roughly spherical, but since it's elastic there's a dip in the middle where the remains of the ore tub are lying. We figure there's about three to six hundred tons poised up there. If whatever's sustaining the field gives out, it'll come crashing down on our heads. Has anyone any theories about it?"

He looked dispiritedly along the table as though expecting no reply. His expectation was fulfilled. He went on, "I guess to be on the safe side we'd better evacuate the spot directly under the wreck of the ore tub. But if the field collapses we're going to be buried under chunks of magnesium oxide anyway, so I don't think the odds are good."

"Anybody left outside?" Snutch said.

"The control staff at the landing field," someone said. "I hear they're all right."

"Any chance of our getting out?"

"Right now, I'd say none whatsoever."

"And nothing can get in," Snutch muttered. "And until the master ship comes to collect the ore tubs, no way of getting a signal out because we haven't the power to reach Marduk with surviving equipment, and even at maximum drive it'll take weeks to get supplies here and they'll have to be—Rureth! How about a tunnel?"

"We thought of that," Rureth said. "But the trouble's this. The whole area where the force field meets the ground is concreted, except for a small stretch where it's been so hammered by the impact of the ore tub that it's practically fused together. Inside the field, where we can get to, there isn't enough equipment to break through concrete and make a tunnel. I signaled the landing control staff to see if they could find some equipment out by the mines themselves, but there's been subsidence and a lot of the underground machinery is buried. When the ore tub hit, it must have been equivalent to a small earthquake. Shook all the tunnels down."

Snutch's hands were shaking where they lay on the table.

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He noticed them and clasped them hastily together. With much effort he said, "Casualties—oh, what's the use? We're done for."

All eyes switched to him. Someone said, "While there's life—"

Snutch thumped the table and leaped to his feet. He said hysterically, "Hope? Where's the hope? When's somebody going to show me hope? All you do is drone on about disaster and how we're imprisoned and—"

Inconspicuously Rureth exchanged glances with the chief of the medical staff, on whom Snutch had been about to call for his casualty report. The doctor nodded; he made some motion or other beneath the table, and suddenly clapped his hand against Snutch's thigh.

The manager's eyes rolled upwards and he began to sag at the knees. Rising unhurriedly, the doctor helped him to fall back accurately into his chair.

"Shock," he said to the others. "He'll be out for about three minutes. I gave him a palm-injector load of anti-tension specifics. I'd pass them round, but my supplies are short."

"All supplies are short," someone said pessimistically.

"Yes," the doctor said thoughtfully. He looked at Rureth. "By the way, some of your men aren't helping any. Last night, we had enough casualties from the main disaster without having to waste material on men beating each other up."

"My men?" Rureth said.

"Yes. The one who started it seemed to have been un-stabled by shock, and claimed that the guy he was beating up was responsible for the crash. Dorsek was the name. The other was a youngster." He snapped his fingers. "Someone did tell me who he was; he couldn't talk for himself. He had a concussion and his face was badly bruised."

"Kazan?" Rureth said.

"That's right. Young fellow. Fair-haired."

"Dorsek's fault, then," Rureth said after a pause. He debated with himself: should he inquire how Kazan was, do anything about him? He found he hadn't got the spare energy. He said, "Dorsek has a case of the same thing as

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that moron Hego I sent over to you yesterday. What did you make of him?"

The doctor shrugged. "I didn't get very far. Ran some tests. But when the disaster hit, I figured a strong man was going to be useful in rescue work. So I turned him loose. I guess we can pick the threads up later. After all, he can't run away."

XVIII

YOU COULD feel the terror, Clary thought. As though the fantastic enclosure of the settlement were a bowl, filling slowly, trapping the people inside with a rising wave which in the end was sure to drown them.

How long they were going to be safe, she dared not guess. This was the safest place she had been able to find, and by the same token it was the least safe of all, because it was precisely under the sag in the—whatever it was—force field, someone had said; they were theoretically impossible according to someone else but that was what it seemed to be. Anyway, the orders had been to abandon this building, which was half devastated by fire but still had many habitable rooms, in case the field gave way and dropped the remains of the ore tub to the ground.

She stared out cautiously over the settlement. There were some lights on now, like little miracles in the overpowering gloom. At a few points the domed crust had been smashed away, and gray sky could be glimpsed, but there was almost no light from overhead.

There was some sort of rescue work still going on. She felt guilty to be hiding here when she was uninjured, but there was no knowing how the poison of suspicion was working on the minds of the terrified workers.

A moan came from behind her. She darted back from the

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gap in the wall through which she had been peering, and dropped to her knees beside Kazan. She could just make out that his eyes were open in the mask of regenerative ointment the doctor had smeared on him so angrily the night before.

"What—happened?" he said thickly.

She laid her finger on her lips. "They're looking for you," she said. "I've had to hide you. Dorsek tried to beat you up. Do you remember that?"

"I remember." He forced himself into a sitting position, grunting with the effort. "And I remember that I was too dazed to talk to the doctor, isn't that right?"

Clary felt a heart-lift of relief. She said, "That's right!"

"And you—you helped me away, and then somebody shouted for Hego. I remember that." She could see his frown as a kind of blurring of his forehead. "Someone came after us. And then a wall fell down, I think."

"It saved our lives," Clary said. "I'm sure of that. A piece out of the side of a building fell in front of them." She hesitated. "Kazan, what were they angry with you for?"

He made to bury his head in his hands, but she stopped him with a quick movement. She told him about the ointment on his bruised face. He shrugged, nodded, and folded his hands.

Then he told her about the seam that Hego hadn't plugged.

"And they think the disaster is your fault?" Clary said incredulously. "When it's Hego's?"

"Is it?" Kazan said. He coughed; there was a lot of dust in the air. Then he wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. "Or does it go back a lot further? It's Bryda's fault, maybe. Or the conjurer's—whoever he was. But they aren't here. I am. And—Clary, why is it so dark?"

"There's something over the settlement. Nobody knows what it is. It stopped the ship from exploding right in the middle of the settlement and killing everyone. But nobody can get through it to the outside."

"So that's what I did," Kazan said.

"Kazan!" She seized his hand. "You've got to stop blaming yourself for all this!"

"No, I'm serious." He sounded calm now, as though his

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faculties were coming back. "I remember quite clearly. I made the air solid. I've done it before, and I forgot how I did it because, of course, it wasn't me that did it at all." He gave a hysterical chuckle. "It was the black thing that did it. Well, at least I know beyond doubt now."

She stared at his vague gray outline, uncertain whether she was really seeing his face or only remembering it. She said, "Can you undo it again?"

There was a silence between them. At last, in a voice like dead leaves, he said, "No. No, I've forgotten again."

He cocked his head, listening. "What's that?" he said, his tone changing completely.

Clary lingered for a moment and then she too strained to hear a kind of rasping sound, coming from one of the inner walls, or rather from beyond it. Footsteps, cautiously feeling for secure support among powdered debris.

"Don't move!" Clary hissed, and soundlessly rose from beside him. Casting about for something to serve as a weapon, she saw where a chunk of the room's ceiling had fallen, and for want of anything else caught it up clubwise in her hand. She took three light steps towards the door.

The door ground back and a hand light transfixed her with its beam.

Instantly it was extinguished; there was a scuffle and the door closed rapidly.

"It's Rureth!" a voice said. "For the love of life don't beat my skull in, you fool!"

"Clary! Stop it!" Kazan said, rising on one knee and feeling himself too weak to go any further. "Rureth, what are you doing here?"

"Finding you ahead of Hego and Dorsek," Rureth said. He moved shadowy across the floor, his feet crunching slightly in the powdery droppings from the damaged ceiling. "I should have come looking for you earlier, but I was so exhausted. I got myself a meal and some pickup drugs from the doctor and then I started to make sense of what was happening around me. You know that Hego and Dorsek have more or less taken charge of the Berak workers and made them up into teams to find you and murder you?"

Clary drew in her breath with a little moaning sound.

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"And you!" Rureth said, half-turning to her. "Damned lucky I got here first. I gave you credit for thinking that the area we kicked them out of with such dire warnings would be the area they'd be most reluctant to look for you in. So far that's held good. I can't say how long it will last."

He pulled some dark lumpy objects from his pockets and held them out to Kazan and Clary. "Stole some provisions for you," he added gruffly. "Thought you'd need them by now."

They accepted the food silently and began to eat. Kazan's jaw was so stiff after Dorsek's attack on him that he could barely chew.

"I gather you decided to take the blame for what happened," Rureth said after a brief pause. "Better set me straight on the facts."

Kazan did so. When he came to the end of his recital, he heard Rureth give a low whistle of astonishment.

"I never took any of these tales about you seriously," he said. "I thought they were just so much superstitious garbage, but come to think of it, you told me yesterday that you had to believe in devils. Now I've seen that force field holding up the wreck of the ore tub, I'll accept anything. You can destroy it again? Hold it—even if you can, that means the wreck, and all the tonnage of magnesium oxide it's supporting, will come down round our ears!"

"Anyway, I don't know how I did it," Kazan said shortly.

"We'll fix that," Rureth countered. "Get the doctor to work on your memory, and the scientific staff. But we'll have to start by getting you out of reach of Hego and Dorsek, and that won't be easy. Better get you to Snutch's office, or his quarters. No, his office would be better. People don't break into the manager's office so readily. Not that Snutch will be exactly pleased to see you."

"I can imagine," Kazan said.

Rureth pondered for a moment. He said finally, "I guess it must be the fact that I know if I don't do something I'm going to die right here. Otherwise I'd never take this business of you creating a force field seriously, let alone, the part of it involving devils. I'll go make certain the coast is clear;

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then you'll have to run like blazes straight to Snutch's office and we'll take it from there."

Luck was on their side. They saw several people on their way, but no one who recognized Kazan with the mask of ointment on his face or who knew Clary as his companion. And Rureth, of course, was hardly a suspicious character. But there was no doubt about the terror reigning beneath the impossible roof.

No one was in any of the administrative offices they had to pass through to reach Snutch's; no pretense could be made of keeping up normal work, and anyway power was too precious to be squandered on office equipment. There was a smell of dust in the rooms. It seemed appropriate.

Their entrance into the actual office was spectacular. With Snutch were Lecia and the medical chief; they could be heard through the door discussing something in raised voices. Rureth wasted no time on politeness and opened the door abruptly with no warning. All three of the room's occupants turned, exclamations rising to their lips.

But it was Snutch who made himself heard. His face went death-pale and he rose slowly from his chair, pointing a shaking arm at Rureth and looking at Kazan as if hypnotized.

"Are you insane?" he said in a shrill voice. "What do you mean by bringing him here? They want to kill him, and they'll kill us too if you don't take him away!"

Rureth hesitated, taken aback, and glanced at the doctor, who shook his head barely perceptibly.

"What good do they think killing Kazan will do?" Rureth barked. "Is that going to get us out of here? I don't pretend to understand how he did it, but it seems pretty certain it was Kazan who stopped the ore tub falling right in the settlement and killing the lot of us!"

"He's going to make up for it by coming here!" Snutch broke in. "Take him away!"

"Shut up," Rureth said coldly. "Sit down. You don't have to prove that you're overwrought—just keep quiet." He turned to the doctor and briefly outlined what Kazan had told him.

"What it needs, obviously," he finished, "is to bring back

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the conscious knowledge of how it was done. I don't know if you have any drugs or anything which you can use, but it seems our only chance. We can't wait for outside help. We'll die of thirst even if we don't starve first."

The doctor put his hands to his head. "It makes as much sense as anything else that's happened," he said. "I don't know about drugs I can use. What I had, I had to use as make-do analgesics or euphorics. But I guess I could try hypnotic regression."

"It's up to you," Rureth nodded. "We'd better call together as many of the scientific staff as we can, to see if they can make sense of whatever physical principle is involved."

The doctor was going through his pockets; he laid half a dozen 'palm-injectors on the desk. "Those may help," he said. "Random assortment, but the best we have." He looked at Kazan speculatively. "So Dorsek wasn't so crazy when he tried to beat you up," he added.

"I guess not," Kazan said listlessly.

Snutch, who had been staring wildly from one to another of the people in the office, burst out, "Don't *any* of you understand? If they find he's here—"

"Go cut your throat," Rureth snapped.

And there was a sound of heavy footsteps in the ante-room.

They all froze, wondering who it might be, except Snutch. He paused for only an instant, his mouth working, and lunged forward past his desk, avoiding Rureth's startled attempt to catch hold of him, and flung open the door. As the others started to rise, appalled, they saw the blank and astonished face of Hego over Snutch's shoulder. The bully was covered in dust, and there was dried blood on his forehead. Behind him were two more of the Berak workers, each carrying a length of metal rod as an improvised club.

"He's in there!" Snutch babbled. "You can have him! Take him! Get him away from me!"

"Who?" Hego said in a thick, uncertain voice, frowning at the manager's peculiar behavior.

Rureth caught the doctor's attention and gestured at the palm-injectors on the desk. The doctor's eyes widened. Nod-

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ding, he snatched up two of the little sac-and-needle devices and thrust one at Rureth while palming the other himself. They rushed after Snutch.

Perhaps mistaking their appearance for the launching of some unaccountable attack, Hego's two companions blanched and beat a hasty retreat. Rureth caught Snutch on the nape with his injector; the doctor sank his into the flesh of Hego's bare forearm. In a moment they were slumping unconscious.

"That gets rid of two of our problems," the doctor said without emotion. "Call up the rest of the scientific staff, Rureth. I'll try and get some drugs here before the word reaches Dorsek. Hego is merely a fool, but from the way he's been behaving since the disaster, I'm inclined to think Dorsek is insane."

XIX

"SUMMARY OF human existence," the doctor said with a twisted smile, looking round the office.

"What?" Rureth said, glancing up, eerie in the fading glow of an over-used hand light.

"Look around you," the doctor said. "I feel there's something—I don't know—epic? That's not the word." He snapped his fingers. "Archetypal is what I mean. About situations like this. The contrast."

"Don't understand you," Rureth said curtly. He wiped his face. It was getting stuffy.

The offices were in a state of siege. They had called up on the surviving communicator channels all the personnel who could be spared from such essential duties as power maintenance or nursing, and there were now fifty-odd people in the office and the anterooms. Most of them were the uninjured members of the Marduk staff. Hego and Snutch, who would be unconscious for some time yet, were roughly piled on the floor in the corner.

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The doctor said, "I'm a romantic, I guess. But hasn't it generally been like this in history? A permanent crisis between ignorance and fear on one hand, and desperate attempts to get at the facts on the other?"

"Could be," Rureth said, not seeming very interested.

"I'd like to talk with you, Kazan," the doctor said, turning. "If we get out of here alive, that is. Those workers out there, from Berak, who seem to have decided that you're purely a bad influence and they'd solve everything by getting rid of you. I can understand their situation, I think. It's got precedents. Primitive history is full of them. Like—what were the great prespace empires?"

Kazan, sitting passively beside Clary at the side of the room, seemed to spark alert. He said, "I didn't think of it like that. The—the Romans, I read about."

"That's right," the doctor said. He picked up some surgical cleansing cloths from a pile on Snutch's desk and wiped his exposed skin. "They came, and they built their surprisingly advanced houses with underfloor hot-air heating systems, and their metaled roads that lasted for centuries, and the serfs all around kept on grubbing in the dirt and worshipping their nature spirits. And later on, when the Age of Technology got started, some people were traveling in airliners and rockets and enjoying quite an advanced standard of living, while a lot more people were still at the nature-spirit and manual agriculture stage. And, as I picture it, the situation where you come from was similar again. Your home world was colonized, and because it was hospitable the population increased rapidly, and then because it did increase so fast and there wasn't a solid foundation of production to feed and clothe and house so many people you got this unlikely return to basics—staying alive and fed. And political divisions, and contrast between wealthier and poorer areas on the same planet. Isn't that the picture?"

"I guess so," Kazan said. It felt strange to be making this academic analysis in the shadow of death, but it also felt calming, because it was exercising his rational faculties, and he needed to be reminded that he possessed some. "I don't know the whole story. But as I piece it together, when the main wave of expansion caught up with the trail-blazers and

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the pioneers, Berak was an isolated backwater. When I was a kid—Luth's father was the ruler then—there wasn't a spaceport on the continent. Luth had one built, but it wasn't until he was kicked out that much use was made of it. And even then it didn't make much difference to most people."

"Right." The doctor eyed him speculatively. "But your background is the same as that of most of those howling idiots out there, and you've managed to escape your circumstances. I want to find out how. Afterwards."

One of the young men from Marduk who had been keeping watch outside thrust his head through the half-open door of the office. He said, "Group of Berak workers coming this way. Some sort of trouble—I couldn't see what."

"Any sign of those supplies they were supposed to be bringing up from the hospital?" the doctor rapped.

"That seems to be what the trouble's about. There's one of your staff with them, being frog-marched along."

There was a clanging hammering noise from outside. The doctor looked at Rureth.

"Any use reasoning with them?" Rureth said hopelessly.

"Probably not," the doctor said. "But we'll have to try."

Gloom lay over the settlement like a pall. It was like being inside a tomb to emerge into what should have been open air and instead was the hollow semidarkness over which the impossible roof arched. There were perhaps forty or fifty people approaching in purposeful silence, with Dorsek at their head.

Seeing that someone had come out to meet them, Dorsek gave a brusque command to his companions and walked forward the last few paces alone.

"You got him in there?" he said.

Rureth stared at him stonily. "Do you mean Kazan?" he said.

"You know who I mean. The man who condemned us to death like this."

"I wouldn't know about that," Rureth snapped. "Kazan is there. And that man you're holding captive"—he pointed at the medical aide who had gone to fetch the necessary

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drugs from the half-ruined hospital—"has drugs which the doctor wants."

"Kazan's in need of no drugs," Dorsek said. "He wasn't even scratched till I got my hands on him. And I was pulled off before I'd done more than bruise him."

"I need them to get at facts he can't remember," the doctor said. "To learn how to get us out of here."

Dorsek drew his lips back from his teeth. He said, "He's got you fooled too, hasn't he? But he doesn't fool us. He caused this. He's got to be punished for it."

There was a grumble of agreement from those behind him.

"What are you expecting to happen if you get your hands on him?" Rureth demanded. "You expect to kill him and find the dome, whatever it is, vanish? So you can get out?"

"We'll make him let us out," Dorsek said.

"You're out of your mind!" Rureth said after a moment of astonished hesitation. "You can't—"

"Hold it," the doctor cut in quietly. "Explain, Dorsek."

"What is there to explain?" Dorsek countered stubbornly. "He put us here, he gets us out, or we square accounts with him before we all die."

"Where is he?" someone shouted from behind. "Get him out to us!"

"You heard that," Dorsek said. "Send him out. Unless you want us to smoke you all out."

"You want to suffocate yourselves?" the doctor said evenly. "You're not such a damned fool that you can't smell how thick the air is getting, even though we managed to knock away some of the crust overhead. Smoke us out? You'd stifle first."

Dorsek hesitated. The doctor seized the opening.

"I want twelve hours," he said. "If he can undo the—well, whatever it was that made the force field over us—if he can, it'll have to be done in that time."

Dorsek shook his head. "Twelve hours is too long," he snapped.

"I want to get out of here as much as you do," the doctor retorted. "More, apparently!" He raised his voice to make sure his words would carry to Dorsek's companions. "You're talking about smoking him out, and all that would do would be

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to kill the lot of us quicker than jump! You don't want to get out of here alive, apparently—but I'll bet that the rest of you do! In twelve hours we can find out if there's a way."

"And if there isn't?" Dorsek said.

"How can we be any worse off than we are right now?" the doctor demanded.

"Six hours," Dorsek said suddenly. "That's all. Then we come in after you—clear? If you don't send him out to us."

The doctor blanched. He said, "I'll need—"

"You get nothing!" Dorsek cut in. "Except time. And six hours is a hell of a long time. Count yourself lucky. And I warn you, if you're lying, we'll settle accounts with you as well as with Kazan, understood?"

"I'll need the drugs that man was bringing me," the doctor said firmly.

"They got spilled," Dorsek said. "You can go sort them out of the dirt on the ground, if you like. He oughtn't to have struggled."

The doctor seemed to go limp. He said nothing, but turned and went back into the building with his head bowed. With a final glare at Dorsek, Rureth followed him.

"What are you going to do now?" he demanded when he and the doctor were inside again. All those waiting for the outcome of the argument with Dorsek tensed to hear the answer.

"I'm not beaten yet, by the wyrdsl!" the doctor said. "The smug gasbrained fool!" He drew himself up and looked at Kazan. "I'll have to use the oldest and most primitive technique still in the medical repertory, and *will* it to work."

As though to himself, he added, "You're intelligent, you ought to be a good subject. But I wish I had the right drugs to help you along."

"You mean me?" Kazan said.

"Yes." The doctor indicated a vacant chair which had been shoved into the middle of the room in front of Snutch's desk. "Sit there. Lean back. Close your eyes and relax completely. The rest of you, shut up. I don't want a sound to be heard."

Kazan obeyed. Clary rose from where she had been sitting

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and peered anxiously forward, her hands clasping and unclasping.

"Make yourself comfortable," the doctor said. "That's right. Have you ever been hypnotized before by voice alone?"

Kazan shook his head, looking startled; his surprise was shared by all the others present.

"That makes us even," the doctor said with an attempt at gallows humor. "Relax, close your eyes—that's right. You feel comfortable, you're quite relaxed, you feel sleepy, you feel your eyelids getting heavy, now they're shut, you can't open them again, you feel sleepy, you feel relaxed and comfortable, relaxed and comfortable, your eyelids are very heavy and your body is getting heavy because it's relaxed and you feel sleepy."

He reached out, continuing his droning flow of instructions, and took Kazan by the wrist. He raised the arm to shoulder-height and abruptly stroked it for its full length.

"It's rigid!" he said. "You can't lower it, no matter how you try. Your arm is rigid!"

He let go. The arm trembled, and stayed where it was. A sudden bead of sweat trickled down into the doctor's eye, and he wiped it away mechanically.

"Fantastic," he said in a low tone. "It works."

"Four hours!" Rureth said. "And nothing! Nothing!"

The doctor fell wearily back into a chair, staring at Kazan. He said, "It's like a wall. It's as if he himself wasn't responsible for creating the force field—and yet he did! The memory of how he did it simply isn't there!"

"They're getting restive outside," Rureth said. "I went out to see a few minutes ago. Can't you do anything else?"

Wringing her hands, Clary said desperately, "There's got to be something! There's—Doctor! You just said maybe he himself wasn't responsible for the force field!"

A wild hope lit her face. The doctor glanced at her.

"The—the thing he always talks about!" Clary said. "The devil that appeared in the conjurer's ring! You haven't taken that seriously, but suppose it *was* real?"

"What do we do?" the doctor countered. "Even if it was!"

"Well—" She cast around. "Well, maybe he remembers

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what the ring was like, what the conjurer did." Her voice trailed away, and she added defensively, "We haven't got much time, you know!"

"I'll try," the doctor said. He forced himself to his feet. "Kazan! Remember again, remember clearly. Go back in your mind. Go back to the time when the black devil appeared in the ring!"

Kazan's body was racked by a vast shudder. He said, "I—I remember."

"What was the ring like? What did the conjurer do?"

"He—I don't know. It was dark in the room. I didn't see."

"Remember!" the doctor insisted.

There was a sudden noise behind him, and he glanced round angrily, words forming on his lips to rebuke the person who was interrupting. He never uttered them. The noise was from Hego, still half unconscious in the corner, who was struggling to speak.

"What's happened?" Rureth said in a low voice.

"He's probably in a susceptible state," the doctor answered equally softly. "It often happens. I knocked him out with a heavy dose of the same drug I would have used to help Kazan go into trance if I'd had any more of it." He turned back to Kazan.

"You saw the ring!" he insisted. "You remember it, you remember what the conjurer did!"

"Yes," a thick voice said. "I saw the ring."

The doctor looked at Rureth with an expression almost of fright. Together they turned to look at Hego again.

The bully was struggling to get to his feet, and failing because his muscles were limp with the aftereffects of the drug he had been given. He could speak, though, and he was speaking, mumbling incoherently.

"The ring—I saw when the conjurer showed it to Bryda. Ring of copper and gold sliding like this." He made an indeterminate gesture. "Pictures on it. Carved on it. Pictures of things. I remember. I see it now."

His face was streaming with perspiration, and when he broke off his teeth started to chatter with terror.

The doctor closed his eyes for a moment, seeming to gather his strength. Then he said in a calm voice, "Can you

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remember it so clearly that we could make one, Hego?"

"I see it now!" Hego insisted. "I see it right in front of me. Like there!"

He was staring now at a place on the floor in front of Kazan where there was nothing anyone else could see. Shaking, he raised his arm and pointed for a moment. Then he gave a tremulous groan and fell forward on his own knees.

"I think," the doctor said with much effort, "that something is happening. Here in this room. Do you feel it, Rureth?"

The tubby man nodded. Together and in silence, with those watching, they waited for whatever it was to be fulfilled.

XX

WEARY BEYOND endurance, weakened by lack of sleep and food and the pounding of the doctor at his mind, Kazan was yet almost unbearably aware. His consciousness burned like a white-hot star in the dark cloud of his body.

Under the doctor's commands, ever since he entered trance he had moved back in memory, out of the present and into the past, so that now his knowledge of time was tenuous and diffuse; *then* and *now* were arbitrary to him, and he had lost track of how long had elapsed since he was hypnotized.

Since the ship's doctor had jolted him out of his lost apathy en route to Vashti, his memory had widened vastly in scope. The events over which the doctor now commanded him to return were close to reality in their vividness, and the sense of helplessness which possessed him when he struggled to remember how he had acted to save the ship crashing into the center of the settlement had the quality of waking nightmare.

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And yet, little by little, the frustration was fading.

More than once he had almost shrieked at the doctor, the incessant questioning fraying his nerves to the breaking point. Somehow he had held on. Perhaps it was the conscious knowledge that the penalty of yielding was certain death which drove him so far. He had no energy to spare with which to wonder.

Now something had happened. As if a limit had been reached, beyond which the gap in his memory—made? willed?—must somehow be filled. He knew the shape of the gap, as it were; his fevered mind was hunting through everything he had ever learned for facts with which to fill it, and now he was finding them. Ghostly, they seemed to loom out of nowhere, irrelevant and yet meaningful. A physical law, barely noted, and a theoretical equation derived from a tenuous chain of logic rooted in that law. A table of figures, concerned with the properties of gases. Two seemingly unrelated statements about the nature of motion in a gravitational field.

That was—and it had gone again. Almost! Almost! And now he was lost from what he had been concentrating on before and there was mention of a ring and the black thing appearing in it and the vivid intensity with which he could now recall the past brought back the dark room, the blue-glowing circle, the thing in the middle with ember eyes, the voice like a gale piping on an organ of mountains.

Soon, the voice said. *Not yet. Not at once.*

There was a strangeness in Kazan's mind. A weighing sensation. As if he were being evaluated. And beyond that, the most world-shaking knowledge.

The black thing—the devil, if it was a devil—was as clear to him as though it were physically present. He doubted whether it was. He doubted if it had been before, if it was ever present anywhere as a solid form. He could ask it his questions. Or he could answer his questions for himself, using knowledge that he had just acquired. It didn't matter which. The effect was the same.

I have not been possessed? I have always been Kazan?

Kazan magnified. But Kazan.

But the year and a day of service?

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When Kazan is ready. When Kazan-optimus is realized.

Why? What? How? Who? Who? Who?

The field in the ring, the web of forces (diagram, as it were: so and so and so my—this consciousness there—then) and effective identity. Intense, directed forces. (Nervous system.) Pass through the ring. (Nervous system resonating with the web of forces, glowing like lightning strikes, optimized, freed: brain, memory, reflexes, subconscious processes, the physical totality of human existence.) Consequence: perfect memory, immeasurable intelligence, reactions under stress beyond the human. Slowly developed. Made ready. Beneficial. (These concepts blended simultaneously in a flash of illuminating comprehension.)

Who? Who? Who?

I—black thing seen by you. (A glimpse of others. Very many others. A glimpse of power and intelligence as vast as the cosmos itself.) Called a devil, if you like.

The conjurer?

Service for a year and a day. Eventually.

Why?

Awe; disbelief; urge to understand; incredulous doubt; personal experience; conviction; possession; absence of penalties; benefits.

Kazan began to laugh. It was like the triumphant laughter of a child afraid of ghosts, emerging from a long dark passage into the daylight, mocking the absurdity of his own groundless alarm. His trance ended. He saw with total clarity. He saw it all.

Then he opened his eyes.

They were looking at him. Rureth, the doctor, Clary, Hego, those beyond who had waited tensely while his memory was scoured clean of facts that might perhaps have bearing on their predicament. They were very pale, so pale that even in the twilight gloom they could eye each other furtively and see that their faces were all bloodless and wan.

Rureth spoke first. He shifted, as if he had remained in one position for a very long time and was stiff in all his limbs. He said, "I—don't know what happened. But something did. Something important."

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Seeming to come out of a daze, Clary shook her head to clear it. "Kazan!" she said. "Are you all right?"

"Yes," Kazan answered. He sounded very tired. "Yes, I'm all right." He didn't look directly at any of them, but kept his eyes straight ahead. He got to his feet and began to walk towards the door.

"Kazan!" Rureth said sharply, but the doctor laid a hand on his arm and shook his head.

Everyone else drew back slightly. Hego, crouched against the wall in the corner, kept rocking his head and making little moaning sounds, but that seemed to be the only noise in all the world.

When Kazan reached the door, Clary started forward after him, as though she would have caught at his hand. But she did not; she merely fell in behind, and in turn the others copied her.

Outside, in the fearful dusk, the workers from Berak were waiting in little knots of half a dozen, talking in low voices, occasionally falling silent as though oppressed by the weight of what overhung them. When they realized that people were emerging from inside the building they had surrounded, they gave a united sound halfway between a sigh of relief and a growl of anticipation, and began to move forward. By chance or design their groups patterned into a rough arrow-head shape, and among the foremost group was Dorsek.

He seemed to have aged in the past few hours. When he spoke, though a note of cracked triumph colored his words, his voice was hoarse and shrill at the same time.

"Kazan!" he said. "What are you doing out here? Come to beg for mercy?"

Kazan said nothing. He walked past him, towards his companions, who would have fallen back but perhaps felt ashamed to do so with so many eyes upon them. Foremost among them was a man who carried one arm limp in a crude sling, and grimaced at frequent intervals with pain.

Kazan put his hand on the splinted arm and walked on by.

"What'd he do to you?" Dorsek snapped. He looked puzzled, not knowing why he had let Kazan pass.

The man with the broken arm probed cautiously with the

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fingers of his other hand. "It—doesn't hurt now," he said after a pause. "And say, look! I can move it without it hurting."

He raised it, shaking it free of the sling, and turned it this way and that. The doctor hurried forward, demanding to take a look at it. He peeled away the bandages holding the splint with a mutter of disgust at the primitive techniques he had been forced to use through shortage of decent supplies.

"You had a broken radius and ulna both," he said. "But you have a whole arm now."

"What do you make of that?" Rureth said in low tones to Clary beside him. Then he looked at her, and realized idiotically late that she was not where he had thought her. Nor was Kazan, he found when he remembered about him and raised his eyes to him.

"Where have they gone?" he said, and the people gathering to look at the miraculously healed arm suddenly remembered Kazan too.

"That way!" someone said, pointing towards the area which had been emptied of its people, under the sag in the center of the force field overhead. Everything else disregarded, they began to stride, run, limp or hobble in Kazan's wake.

They came upon him in an open space between three apartment blocks—one was the partly-ruined block where Clary and he had found refuge, Rureth realized. They would have gone close, but Clary had halted twenty paces from him and stood with her back to those who had followed, her arms outstretched in a kind of symbolic barrier. They did not attempt to pass the point where she stood, but paused uncertainly and asked random questions of each other without expecting answers.

"What's he doing? Why's he standing there? Is he going to get us out alive?"

And then—

"Look there!" somebody shrilled, flinging up an arm. All heads turned to the threatening down-bulging menacing weight above. Kazan was looking up at it, his face blind with a kind of exaltation, and his hands knotted into fists so hard that the muscles of his arms were like braided ropes.

There were grinding noises like ice breaking on a river at

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the time of spring thaw; then sliding rasping sounds and heavy crashing sounds, so that people flinched as if from a blow and began to move together shoulder to shoulder. And last, there came cracking noises, crisp and sharp, to put listeners in mind of a giant snapping tree-trunks across his knee for firewood.

"Look!" someone shrilled. "Look! Look! Look!"

The opaque dome roofing them was splitting apart; plates of darkness were riving off and falling, making way for the sight of evening sky and sunset and the first hesitant stars. When almost all the sky was clear again, there came a shower of fine white gritty dust, stinging the eyes and making the people spit. But rain to desert travelers could not have been more welcome than the dust to the imprisoned workers.

A cry of jubilation went up, and men and women started incontinently towards what had been the limit of the impenetrable vault. Already it could be seen that those outside on the landing field had realized what was happening, and were turning the brightest of their lights on the half-ruined settlement.

Alone, turned to a white ghost by the sifting dust, Kazan wavered where he stood. Clary stepped forward, putting her hand to her mouth, but before she or any of those who still lingered could come to him, Kazan had fallen prone to the ground.

He lay still, as one dead.

XXI

"IN A MINUTE," the doctor said. "I haven't let anyone see him except Clary. I don't know what he did, but I can tell you this. The energy to accomplish it came from his own resources, and when I picked him up afterwards he was as exhausted as if he were dying of starvation. Do you understand it?" he shot finally at Rureth.

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The tubby man shook his head. He said, "Did Hego? It seemed it was his talking about the—the ring, you remember, which set Kazan off."

"He was scared," the doctor said. "Just scared. The evocation of that devil stamped itself deep on his mind. As to whether he had anything to do with triggering Kazan's reaction, how can I say? My guess is that it was the immediacy of what he said that counted, if anything did. Saying he could see the actual ring right in front of him. Perhaps that broke some barrier in Kazan's memory—but I just don't know."

"Dorsek?" Rureth said. His eyes roved the newly repaired walls of the room in which he was sitting. There wasn't much that could be done until relief ships came out from Marduk, but repair of the hospital had been the top priority, and gangs had labored at it with bare hands to weatherproof and restore it.

"You know some of the workers figured out that Dorsek had wanted to kill the guy who saved them in the end," the doctor said.

"Yes. I saw him. He didn't look pretty."

"He isn't. I'm keeping him alive, but that's all I can do. Hospitalization on Marduk for him. And Hego, too. And quite a lot of others. Including, and especially, Snutch."

Rureth was silent for a moment. He said, "Is it really that bad?"

"Worse." The doctor shrugged. "I have to admit I never realized how deep his sense of frustration went, though I had my suspicions when he hit Kazan without reason the day he was landed here. Remember?"

"Seems like an eternity ago," Rureth said. "What is his trouble?"

"Frustration. Simply that. He pledged himself to a five-year contract, and renewed for another term because he was afraid that in five years he would have been left behind in his profession at home, and he's been regretting the decision steadily more and more without being able to pluck up the courage not to renew for still another term. It just happens to have come to a head now, because he would soon have

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had to decide whether to stay or leave on the expiration of the second term."

"Can you straighten him out?"

"Oh, yes. They'll root out the irrational fears which make him envious of everyone more intelligent or calmer than he is, restore his confidence in his own ability—the wyrd's know, he has plenty. It won't take long."

He checked the time and got to his feet. "I'll call you in to see Kazan in a moment if he's strong enough," he said, and vanished through the door to the room where Kazan was recuperating. He only kept Rureth waiting a moment; then he was back. He beckoned Rureth to come in.

Kazan was resting in a deep chair with infrared lamps bathing the remaining traces of bruises on his chest. He looked a picture of health aside from that; his face was alight with vigor and the hand he gave Rureth was strong.

"The doctor said you might be too weak to talk," Rureth said, parodying disgust. "You're healthier than I am."

"He does it himself," the doctor said. Rureth shot a startled look at him and gave up the idea he had had of being jocular.

He said, "What I want to get straight—what for the love of life am I dealing with? Some—some super-mutation? Or am I crazy, and did I dream what I think I remember?"

The doctor heaved a sigh. He said, "Since I brought him in here I've disciplined myself against asking. If you want to know how I made it—"

His voice trailed away. Rureth said, "Go on."

"I was afraid to," the doctor said with naked honesty. "I don't know that I want to find out." He rubbed his hands together as if feeling his palms sweaty and uncomfortable. "I don't know that I want the truth."

"I do," Rureth said. "I'm prepared to listen to anything. I'm prepared to believe in devils. Kazan! Will you explain?"

"I'll try and explain," Kazan said. "I know, you see, but I haven't tried to put it into words. Some of it doesn't fit words, anyway. They can use words, but words can't be their normal means of communication—"

"They?" Rureth said.

"The black things. The devils."

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There was a pause. Eventually Rureth said, "Carry on." He sounded grim.

"Even their location," Kazan said. "They have some appreciation of place and time as it appears to us, they know that we exist at physical distances from one another on various planets, but I had the impression that this too was foreign to their nature. And yet there is a vast amount in common between us. What they think of as intelligence has some resemblance to our idea of it. If you like, the fact that they and we both *think*, in whatever different modes, is a link. Well, they exist, and they have enormous intelligence and vast powers, and they have a drive like ours towards total understanding of the cosmos. We form part of their environment, so they want to comprehend us too."

"What connection has all this got with the wild stories Hego was telling about you being possessed by one of them, and raised from the dead, and being contaminated with an aura of evil?"

"Except for two things, the story is true. The aura of evil, as you put it, is of course nonsense, and I am not and have not been possessed."

The doctor jerked forward in his seat with a startled exclamation. He said, "But I was sure—I"

Kazan gave him an expectant look. After a moment he leaned back again, shaking his head. He said, "It occurred to me to check your genes when I had you here unconscious. I was looking for some clue to your talents. Finding nothing, I was thinking in terms of the influence of these devils," he ended in a somewhat disheartened tone.

"Influence, yes, but possession—not yet," Kazan said. "I get the picture, when I think about this, of a rough path being turned into a smooth road, so that what was formerly only fit for foot traffic becomes capable of carrying wheeled vehicles traveling at high speed. I think the image of a path is a kind of symbol for the nervous system of my body. It's being smoothed out, if you like. There were obstructions, and hindrances. Until they are all cleared away, the black thing does not want to enter into possession. Doesn't want to claim the year and a day of service which was its price for helping Bryda."

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"For the love of life!" Rureth said with violence. "When are we coming to the facts in the matter? You're circling round them, never closing in."

"What sort of service?" the doctor said, after a glance at Rureth. "And why? Because from what I've heard, the black thing was willing to make a very fair exchange. It's giving you these powers; it kept the bargain it struck with whatever her name was who was Luth's mistress—Bryda, that's it."

"Oh, yes. It's an honorable bargain. I have no regrets; I consider myself enormously rewarded."

"Then what did this devil want for itself?" Rureth demanded.

"There's one thing about human beings that they can know nothing about, except vicariously," Kazan said. "And that is—dying."

"They're immortal?" Rureth said thinly.

"That wouldn't mean anything to them at all. Until they encountered human beings, they did not believe that intelligence could exist in a—how can I choose a word? Not *body*, that's irrelevant. That intelligence could exist in a perishable *context*. That awareness could be finite, if you like, and certain to terminate."

He closed his eyes, feeling an indescribable echo of the blended thrill which had gone through him when he understood what he had just reported for the first time. The awe, and the doubt, and the shivering disbelief, and the need to comprehend the improbable phenomenon at first hand by sharing the mental experience of a frail creature subject to death.

"They are looking for some clue to explain this thing which to them is a paradox," Kazan said. "Because their nature is so different from ours, they choose what seems to us a very strange procedure to enable them to do so. The man I took for a conjurer, who offered help to Bryda, was—as I now know—serving his promised year and a day in return for some favor granted to him previously, or to someone else. Before he was claimed for that period, he would have undergone the same process of opening out as I have done."

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"For him, perhaps, it was less shocking and frightening. I can imagine that if you, Rureth, or you, doctor, were to experience it you would suffer very little. I came out of the Dyasthala on Berak, illiterate, superstitious to some degree, and incredibly ignorant about the universe in which I found myself. I was haunted almost to the brink of madness by fear of possession, not understanding what was happening to me; my new talents were virtually useless until I found ways to exercise them.

"The ring which the conjurer passed over me—I take that to have been a sort of generator of nervous resonance, which enabled the black thing to—not materialize; they aren't material—present itself at a particular location. When it was passed over me, it informed the black thing about me as an individual, and at the same time allowed the imprinting on my subconscious of the information necessary for me to carry out the service which the black thing had promised as its half of the bargain: the rescuing of Luth.

"That depended on a technique which I didn't attempt to understand consciously—the making of resistant areas in empty air, like steps. At the time when I was actually doing it, I was predominantly pleased, like a child who is proud of having learned to toddle and knows nothing consciously of placing one foot before the other, but simply acts automatically in imitation of adults. When I was able to consider what I had done, my overwhelming terror at being, as I believed, possessed of a devil set up such a barrier in my mind that I could not gain conscious access to the knowledge I had been given.

"When I saw the ore tub tumbling towards the settlement, and realized that I was probably going to be killed along with everyone else, what happened must have been different. I suspect that, as well as marking me as an individual, the conjurer's ring had another function: to impose on me the will to safeguard my life. After all, I was a rare and valuable person; I was pledged in due time to serve out my year and a day, and until that was fulfilled the black things wanted me to remain safe and sound. Reflex on a level below consciousness brought back the technique I had been taught, because it was applicable to the situation and enabled me

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to protect myself, and incidentally the settlement, from disaster.

"By then, though, I had a very much clearer understanding of both physical and mental processes. I could then and there have undone what I had created; I had the facts! The only thing that stopped me was the irrational terror still governing my subconscious, the terror of being possessed. It was not until you had me under hypnosis, doctor, and regressed me to the time when the conjurer called up the black thing, that I was able to make—how shall I put it?—a new appreciation, a new *evaluation* of what had happened, in the light of all the information I'd acquired since then.

"At that point, of course, I broke free. I could reason out why I had failed to understand the true nature of what I had undergone. And I could use my knowledge."

"How"—Rureth's voice shook audibly—"how did you create that force field, and the steps in the air?"

"The black things aren't material. They have had to invent means of using material substances in order to communicate with and influence human beings. Some of the techniques that they have developed are alien to ours. The force field—as good a name as any, I guess—that's one of them. How would it appear to them?" Kazan frowned. "Like this, perhaps: it's strange that we human beings, thinking entities in material bodies, who can move our material limbs, cannot move material objects with which we are not in physical contact. Well, it is! Moreover, the fact that air—which is gas, a state of matter—is permeable is an accident due to temperature and composition. Change the way it's organized, and its properties change too. I could teach you how to do it, I think. But it would take me twenty years."

"It doesn't seem much," Rureth said. "It doesn't seem like a bargain at all, when you're pledged to die for them so that they can experience this unique event." His face was pale.

Kazan stared at him blankly for a moment, and then broke into a peal of laughter. He said, "But—oh, but you don't see it at all! I didn't say that what they wanted during the year and a day of service that they exact was to share the experience of *death*."

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Rureth and the doctor exchanged startled glances. The doctor said, "But—"

"I said *dying*," Kazan cut in. "Do you see now? A creature in a material body is dying from the moment that it completes its growth. Simply to share the awareness of a human being is enough for them; during that time, if there are others among them who wish to claim the experience, they will teach the subject how to make one of the blue-glowing rings and how to find someone else to be pledged to service. But that's all. The adult human being is dying, to their minds; I am, you are, all of us. Lesser creatures die, too. What concerns them is the simultaneous existence of intelligent thought and the awareness of approaching extinction, nothing more. When they are satisfied, they depart. They leave behind whatever gifts they have bestowed, and after that there is perfect freedom."

There was silence for a while. Rureth broke it.

"What are you going to do?" he said in a strangled voice.

"Live," Kazan said. "But beyond that—" He let the words trail away, nodding slowly as though it had just come to him what he ought to do. Under his breath he added, "Yes, I can do that, of course. To move a thing at a distance, or a great many things. They think differently from human beings; that's why it seems such a roundabout operation, but it has a logic of its own."

"What did you say?" the doctor asked.

Kazan shrugged and got up out of his chair. The patched-up hospital walls, to start with, he thought; then the other buildings, and of course, the injured people. If he could turn the air into a solid barrier he could organize the molecular processes of living tissue, and had done so to distract Dorsek's attention from him, and when he had undone as much as possible of the harm which innocent people had suffered indirectly because of him, there was the whole galaxy before him.

On the point of leaving the room, another thing occurred to him, and he paused. It was bad that Rureth and the doctor, or anyone at all, should fear him. The black things did not harm each other, and where there was no conception of damage or destruction, fear could not exist;

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equally, when there was no danger of damage or destruction, it was illogical for people to be afraid of his powers.

He reassured them. When he had done so, he went out of the room, and out of their lives, and out of their minds. For good.

XXII

THIS WAS the place she had been told to come to. She looked at the door for a long time before going in, as though finding the decision to enter a difficult one. Still, she felt so desperate, and the tales she had heard were so convincing.

She opened the door and went in.

Like most houses of the traditional Berak pattern, this one consisted of an open ground floor with pillars the bases of which formed cushioned seats, and another floor above. On one of the seats was a man in dark clothes, who looked up as she entered. He was quite young, she saw, and rather good-looking, although he had a certain air about him which made her sure at once that he was the man she was looking for.

She said, "Are you—are you the conjurer?"

"Some people call me a conjurer," he said with an ironical half-bow. "They bring their problems to me, and I help if I can."

He indicated a seat facing his own, and she moved to it, glancing about her. The house was well appointed; he was clearly prosperous, and he seemed quite affable—not what she had been subconsciously expecting.

"What can I do for you?" he said, leaning back on his own seat and studying her with a thoughtful expression.

"I need—I don't know what I need," she said. "I need out,

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if you like. I was born here, in the Dyasthala, which has gone now."

"The thieves' quarter, they called it," the conjurer nodded.

"That's right. When it was cleared away, I went to work on Vashti for a while—five years. I had to get away because of a man; I thought I could make myself independent in that time. What I didn't consider was that I had only Berak to come back to. And things have gone wrong since my return, and I'm—oh, trapped."

The conjurer nodded. "Yes, Berak is no place—yet—for people like you. And it's not easy to get out of. The mines on Vashti don't recruit casual labor any more, do they? And there's little opportunity elsewhere on this planet. So you came to me. Why?"

She made a vague gesture. "I'd heard talk. About how you could help people change their lives even if they hadn't any special talent. I haven't, which is half my trouble. I'm too ordinary."

"No," the conjurer said. "Not ordinary."

"Thank you. But I know different. I wouldn't have thought about coming to you if I wasn't so hopelessly confused. I always used to scoff at conjurers and witches and people like that. In the Dyasthala they were all fakes, and everyone knew it, and only went along with the pretense because they used to squeeze money out of superstitious rich people, who were fair game. But there is one very odd story which you hear now. You aren't from Berak, are you?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," the conjurer said.

"Are you? I—well, then you know about Luth's rebellion."

The conjurer nodded.

"The other day," she said, "I met a woman. I don't think she can have been old, but she looked old, and she talked so wildly I thought she was crazy. Now I think perhaps she was just drunk, but I'm not sure. She made the most extravagant claims. She said she was Bryda, who used to be Luth's mistress, and she told me about a conjurer who made Luth's escape possible." Looking doubtful, she broke off. "Was it nonsense?" she added after a moment's pause.

"No," the conjurer said.

"You aren't the same conjurer, are you?"

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"No to that too," was the smiling answer. "But we're in the same line of business, you might say. And Bryda may have been drunk, and she may by now be crazy, even, but what she told you was true—Clary."

"How did you—?" she began, and could not finish.

Kazan got up, still smiling, and took from a nearby table a simple ring of gold and copper with a curious chased design around it. He said, "You'll know in a moment. I've been hoping that word would get to you. I've been waiting."

He did something to the ring which made it expand, and laid it down on the floor at Clary's feet. Then he came behind her where he could lay his hand on her shoulder reassuringly.

"Don't be afraid of anything," he said. "You used not to be afraid of devils. You don't have to be afraid now. There's much that I owe you, and I want to repay it."

"But—!" she said in a timid voice.

"Wait," Kazan said.

The ring on the floor began to glow with a faint, faint blue radiance. Darkness seemed to gather within the circle, and out of the darkness looked two ember eyes that were not at all like eyes.

"What world is this?" said an awesome voice like a gale in a range of mountains.

Kazan tightened his hand on Clary's trembling shoulder and replied.