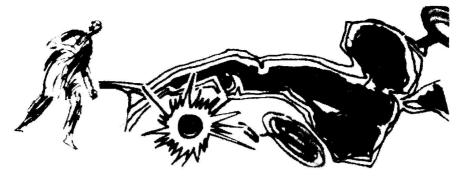
ISSUE 2, 1970 FAIAS

MAC

NOVEL COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE Long Live Lord Kor! **ANDRE NORTON**

Walker Between the Planes GORDON R. DICKSON

ARVONEN - VAN LHIN - CAVRELL - GUNN - TIPTREE, JR.



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ALL STORIES NEW

Vol. 1, No. 2 1970

LESTER DEL REY

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Cover by GAUGHAN

Editor's Corner

the

useful

werewolf

THIS country is unfortunately missing a unique opportunity to utilize the services of its werewolf population. Of course, the last census failed to give an exact idea of how many lycanthropes there are here, but no evidence exists that this singularly hardy breed has died out; and occasional stories from the backwoods regions indicate that at least some must have migrated to this country. It seems a pity to let them spend their lives in the traditional useless way when they could be serving the nation in a manner to bring them honor and respect.

Every able-bodied werewolf should be sought out and at once drafted into special brigades in the Army. Some may be serving now, to be sure; but with the current military attitude, their talents hardly have a chance to be displayed. Given the opportunity to serve with pride and to get special training, they should quickly surpass even the reputation of the vaunted Green Berets.

By nature, a werewolf has splendid night vision and the ability to transverse even the most difficult terrain in stealth and silence. His keen sense of smell can quickly detect the presence of an enemy or the most cleverly concealed underground installation. He needs no expensive equipment, since his best weapons are built into him. He doesn't even need field rations; he can live off the countrymen. And he is almost invulnerable; only a silver bullet can kill him, and such bullets rarely come from modern armament factories.

A hundred well-trained lycanthropes with proper esprit de corps could reduce an entire enemy army to a state of gibbering terror.

Undoubtedly protests would come from the more squeamish about the conditions of enemy casualties. But so far I have been un-

able to find a single rule in the Geneva Convention which specifically bars the use of werewolves in war.

Mustering out after service presents a few problems, of course. Most civilians might object to having known lycanthropes released into the general population, while to retain them in a peacetime army would present some grave difficulties as to dietary rules.

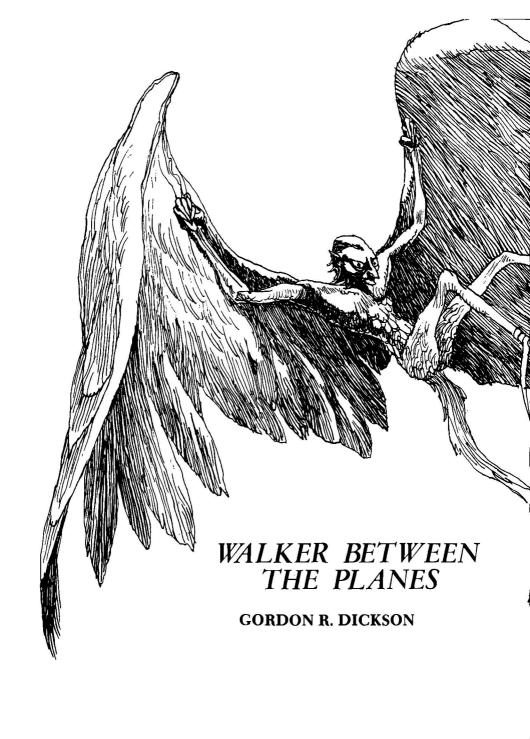
Fortunately, the current crime rate suggests a solution to this. It is well established that one policeman with a trained dog is much more efficient in preventing crime than half a dozen police without dogs. Obviously, one werewolf by himself could do an even better job of patrolling our dangerous parks and crime-ridden streets at night. Some slight revision of the Miranda decision might be needed, but that is for jurists to haggle over.

The chief weakness of the werewolf, up until this year, has been his dependence on the phase of the moon. Changing form seems to work best when the moon is full, indicating that a certain level of light reflected from the lunar surface is necessary for this operation. But today even this need may not limit the lycanthrope's usefulness. The amount of light reaching the subject, even at full moon, is rather slight. With a strong spotlight reflected from the surface of one of the lunar rocks brought back by our astronauts, we could treat a whole corps of werewolves whenever the moon was in the wrong phase or obscured by clouds.

This suggests that the werewolf should not be used as an astronaut without careful testing. On the lunar surface the reflected light might be strong enough to trigger a change in even the most sluggish lycanthrope. Then either the spacesuit would disappear to leave our wolf with no supply of air—without which even he might perish—or his body would be so altered that he could not operate within that suit. It would depend on whether the clothes a man wears become the wolf's fur or whether his change has no effect upon his garments, a question not yet properly investigated by science. Either result would have grave consequences, however.

Naturally, this is a purely theoretical limitation. No one but a fool would consider wasting such talents on the space program when our national defense and the control of crime in the streets demand the maximum use of all our resources—including lycanthropes.

—LESTER DEL REY





FOR a moment he let darkness and agony take him. Then, like a soundless shock wave, reaction flared. Something like panic, but too hard for panic, which he had lost along with fear somewhere back among the scarred rough years since his youth.

Fighting the spasms from the deadly gas, he worked the pill from under his tongue and up between his teeth. As he bit down, a liquid oozed from the capsule and fumes spread through his mouth and toward his brain.

He floated, half-conscious on the hard chair. Suddenly he seemed to be dreaming. Events piled up in his mind—mostly ugly. Thirty years of being alone and friendless has to be ugly. Even the man he knew as Uncle Jim had acted from outmoded pride, not from any love for him.

The aged face of the man who called himself James Rater Bailey had worn a snarl when they left him alone in the cell with Doug. His gnarled fingers clutched at the tattered charms he always wore about his throat and he muttered something, as if praying to the devils it had been said he worshiped.

"What a place! If your grandfather had lived to see it..."

"I didn't ask you to come," Doug Bailey told him stiffly.

Doug had never sought help, knowing he could expect none. It had been a fair fight after he was attacked, and the hoodlum's death had been an accident. Doug could have escaped if he had not called for an ambulance. But he had not asked for mercy even after he had learned the drunk was the son of the state's Governor. When they had lied and then had thrown the book at him, he had faced their gas chamber without pleading. He was not ready to plead for sympathy now.

"Your family may mean nothing to you," Uncle Jim lashed at him. "But in my day, no man escaped his family responsibility."

Doug nodded bitterly. Maybe the old man was right. Once, according to the books, the family and not the government had been the basis of society. But that was before people thought they had a right to be supported and to be paid for hours, not work. And family ties were weak at best. Certainly they had never meant much to him. He had been an orphan at ten.

"Doug." The old voice was urgent. "Doug, I didn't come to quarrel but to help you—for your grandfather's sake."

Doug snorted. "Miracles don't work against cyanide."

"Doug, listen. You won't believe me—nobody ever did. But listen!"

For a moment, the appeal cut through Doug's cynicism. Maybe Jim deserved some last-minute respect. He had always been a weird shadow, spoken of in whispers for dark beliefs and practices no one could detail. He was supposed to cast spells and deal with witches, according to some accounts.

"All right, I'll listen," Doug agreed.

"Then take this." A tiny capsule fell from Jim's crooked hand into Doug's palm. "Put it under your tongue and bite down on it just before... It's a powerful antidote, boy—maybe too powerful. But you'll have a chance."

Now the dream-events were beginning to fade and slow, to draw themselves out into long, hollow sounds here in the gas chamber. The taste of the capsule was again in Doug's mouth and he felt himself being wrenched and flung—as if across some great, unimaginable distance of time or space...

... Into whiteness.

IT was white sun-glare without a sun, dry white mist all about him and powdery whiteness under him. It was a strangely filled emptiness, without direction. Then abruptly, a small darkness soared over him and passed on.

Instantly he felt cold. No, he felt emptied, suddenly weakened—robbed, as if something had been stolen from his integral self. His eyes turned to his right and downward like steel balls drawn by a magnet.

Crouched there, lost in the dazzle, was a thing black and blurred. Something man-sized but which gave an impression of being crow-like and burdened with what had just been stolen from inside Doug. Too heavy to fly now, the creature flopped to its feet and began walking away, and the robbed feeling came back to Doug with hovering anger.

He dug into the stuff in which he stood and gave chase. But the new emptiness about him sapped his strength so that he could not gain on the Walker.

He followed it. But suddenly before him, shining against even the dazzle, hovering in mid-nowhere, loomed a bright and terrible disk—a kind of doorway easting a circle of blinding light.

Instinctively he halted, daunted by the circle of brightness.

The Walker went on, carrying its stolen burden into the circle. Soon it was lost to sight in the forbidding, blazing radiance. As it disappeared, the emptiness expanded around Doug. The doorway was too bright, he was too tired—he could not follow. All he wanted was to relax into the emptiness now swallowing him...which was death, after all. Yes, that was easiest. Simply to die, to turn away from that terrible doorway and let the Walker go. To give up—

But he could not. All his life, a cross-grained stubbornness had driven him, had been his master. It would not let him surrender now.

He stumbled onward. The radiance engulfed him—and then it was gone. He seemed to fall, down through darkness forever.

Horror smothered him. For the darkness was not so much like the absence of light as like being blind. He would not endure it! The fury that had driven him toward the radiant circle rose wildly in him again, became a white flame inside him.

He was falling. . . endlessly falling. And he fought.

Abruptly, there was a faint light. And through it he could see the Walker approaching him. He reached out a hand but the Walker went striding past. Then it stopped and pointed once, and moved on.

Now the light strengthened into a small glow ahead. He willed himself toward it—and found it nearer. There was another circle of brightness, but fainter and less forbidding. He burst triumphantly through it, feeling the momentless moment of his passage slip away from him.

For a second, it seemed that the Walker was back and that a dark hand touched Doug. Then he was through, again in real time and space...

HE emerged to a roar of voices, the howling of a crowd at some wild sport event—and to a deep, sharp pain in his chest. The sun overhead was strangely white and fiercely bright. Ranks of faces surrounded a circle of bare paving fifty feet across. Just above the paving two outlandish figures like man-sized fighting cocks sparred in mid-air with silver-flashing spikes at their heels. As Doug watched, one of the fighters tumbled, wings flailing, to the pavement.

He looked down at himself, at a wide brownish chest that surely

must be his own although he did not recognize it. A male face with folded wing-crests behind it was stooping over him. A three-fingered hand danced before his eyes and something like an invocation sounded in his ears.

In panic, Doug tried to shout but his voice was frozen. As the gesturing fingers moved back, Doug saw that his own hands were manacled by chains to a broad belt around his waist. His feet were clamped together at the ankles and he lay on some boardlike surface at a forty-five degree angle with the pavement.

Directly in front of him, one of the fighting creatures was on the pavement now. The other hovered above it, poising long metal spurs for a killing downstroke.

"Mount! Mount . . ." the circling crowd of faces was clamoring at the fallen figure. But the fallen one seemed stunned and helpless.

"There he goes..." muttered someone behind Doug's head. "Out, duLein!"

The last words cracked commandingly in Doug's ear. Then, without warning, he was no longer watching the fighting figures. He was one of them.

He was the one lying on the pavement, wings spread out behind him and staring up at the descending spurs of his enemy.

A dizziness like the after-effect of a heavy blow on the head clouded his thinking, but not his reflexes. Twenty years of practice in legal and illegal sports had made him a maverick among his own people—but a maverick who could react. Reflex sent him rolling out of the way of the descending spurs.

THE down-stabbing spur-points aimed at Doug slammed into the pavement where he had been, sending sparks flying. His opponent crumpled on the flat surface, moaning, clutching a broken leg.

Reflex still drove Doug like a set of emergency controls. Without thought, he scrambled up and started running.

He careened blindly into the packed throng. They parted conveniently before him, leaving an avenue through which he could see streets between stony buildings five to ten stories in height. Still operating on instinct, he pounded down the corridor of escape opening before him and turned into the closest street.

As he rounded the corner, the roar of the crowd behind him di-

minished. The cliff-like buildings on either side swam past him as he turned right at the first cross-street, left at the next.

Gradually his blurred vision was clearing, bringing his surroundings into focus. The monolithic buildings were like giant slabs of gray rock. He passed no openings, no doorways or windows at street level. It was only at two or three stories of height above him that he saw openings piercing the walls—unglazed openings which were the only evidence that these shapes he passed were not solid blocks of stone.

He turned down another street and staggered, almost falling. He was close to the end of his strength.

He stumbled to a halt at the intersection. Leaning against a building wall in a little patch of sunlight, he looked back. There was no one to be seen behind him and he had passed no one since he had left the crowd at the fight. It should be safe to rest for a moment.

Strangely, it was not his breath that had given out but his legs. He was not even breathing hard. His chest pumped as slowly as if he were sitting in a chair, reading. But his legs trembled uncontrollably and threatened to fold at the knees.

He looked down at those legs. They were thin brown limbs almost lost in the shadow thrown by the huge wings on his back. As he noted the wings, he became aware of a deep ache in their joints—the toll of his rolling over upon them. And he realized the top-heaviness of this body he now inhabited—wings, powerful shoulders, deep chest, all supported by the thin, trembling legs. He shivered, conscious suddenly that he wore nothing more than a thin pair of trunks and here, in the deep shadow between the building walls, the air was chill—

"Kath—ang! Kathang duLe—in!...."

Faint and sad, like a wild bird's cry of two notes repeated in descending series, a voice sounded high overhead.

He looked up. Outlined against the white-blue, cloudless sky in the crack of space between the buildings was a small figure soaring on great gray wings.

"Kathang duLe-in ..."

He bolted to the end of the street and around a corner into another way between high buildings. Staggering to a stop against the nearest wall, he looked up and saw only cloudless sky.

For a moment he felt the relief of having escaped. Then, without

warning, the figure swung again into view above and steeply dived for him.

S IDESLIPPING into the narrow space between the buildings, the flying figure reached to the pavement perhaps three yards in front of him, turning up sharply at the last moment to land on its feet. For the first time he saw that it seemed to have no arms. There were only the undersides of the great spread of dove-gray wings that filled the street, their feathers reaching to the shoulders, and a pair of legs like his own—but even shorter and more fragile. He looked at the body and saw it was female. It was clothed, except for the wings, in close-fitting silver-metallic cloth and a wide black belt from which things like medals dangled.

The flyer stared up at him with enormous eyes. She was a good head-and-a-half shorter than he. Now her arms appeared, unclothed, from among the feathers, where apparently they had been stretched out and moving as part of the wings. As he watched, the wings themselves folded up slowly on her back.

"Kathang!" Her voice was musical, low-pitched in the contralto range, but tense with concern. "You can't just run around the streets like this. The Cadda Noyer will have men out after you any minute now."

Doug stared at her. Her features were tanned, small and narrow, with enormous dark-brown eyes. She was not pretty by any human standard—but, just as he made that judgment about her, he felt his body expressing a strange disagreement. His human mind might not find this female attractive but his winged body clearly did.

"Kathang—" she said again, and started toward him.

He stepped back. She halted, cocking her head to one side.

"I'm not Kathang," he said without thinking, and was shocked by the hoarse bass voice that came booming out of his chest.

"Not—" She stopped. "Kathang, are you out of your mind? I was there at the fights! I saw the soul transfer when the fighter you'd bet on went down—" She broke off, staring narrowly at him. "Don't you know me?"

"No," he said hoarsely.

"The transfer spell must have been incomplete," she said. "Your soul isn't firmly bound yet. But can't you remember? I'm Anvra—Anvra Mons-Borroh, Water Witch, your contract-mate. Kathang, don't you remember anything?"

He shook his head.

"My name is Bai—Bai—" His different lips and tongue stumbled over words they had never before formed. "I'm DougLasss Bai—"

"You've had a reaction, all right." Anvra Mons-Borroh stepped forward quickly before his trembling legs could back him away again. She caught him by the arm. "Never mind. My self-obligation to you holds. I'll get you hidden away somewhere. I'll call on my own Water Witch Aerie for temporary mate-sanctuary for you. Now, you see what it comes to—gambling away your Brotherhood rights? Come on! The Cadda Noyer is probably after you already. There's a catapult just two streets away—"

Stumbling along on his worn-out leg muscles, Doug let himself be led down another street to the right.

This new street was short and buildings flanking it were no more than three stories tall; thus a narrow strip of white sunlight reached one side of the pavement. Suddenly that sunlight was momentarily interdicted by two shadows flickering across it.

Automatically Doug stopped and stared up. Overhead, above the buildings, he saw two soaring figures, male-sized, wearing tight suits in a sort of livery pattern of rec, black and orange squares.

"Cadda Nover," cried Anvra sharply. "Run!"

She set off down the alley. Doug followed, willingly now and at a better speed than before. The pause had rested his legs.

Jogging, Doug and his guide passed one intersection, arrived at another that broadened into a kind of plaza. In its center was a strange-looking structure with a track projecting into the air and a small platform at the foot of the track. The other end of the street opened into a wide square of pavement on which a number of figures were walking, wings folded, while flyers soared in the air above them. Anvra caught Doug's arm and pulled him toward the deserted plaza with its strange mechanism.

Doug jerked free. If the two figures circling above were indeed enemies, he wanted to meet them out where there was room to dodge and run—and possibly where the presence of other people would make the hunters cautious or slow them down. He ran for the large square, Anvra calling him back.

She ran after him, but in a burst of speed he pulled away from her. Once out in the square, however, he stopped. What energy was left in his legs clearly must be hoarded for the fighting—if it came to that.

AND clearly it was going to come to that. The strollers in the square were making no effort to interfere. They had drawn into a loose circle around him. As he paused to look up at the threat overhead, Anvra broke through their ranks. She whistled so loudly, so shrilly, that his ears momentarily deafened.

"Water Witches!" she was trilling as she swung about to face the watchers. "Water Witches. . ."

She whistled again, despairingly. Doug detected no response from anywhere. A shadow flickered over him. Glancing up, he saw the two pursuers zoom lower. They looked a little like clowns in their checkered tricolor suits. But they were both heavy-chested males. They wore no sharp metal spurs on their heels. But where the spurs might have been were what looked like blunt dowels of dark wood, some eight inches long and an inch in diameter.

Doug was sure an assault would soon begin. But it was on him so swiftly that he barely had time to brace himself. The two hunters swooped suddenly, one a little in advance of the other, like hawks upon a rabbit. And Anvra, spreading her wings and leaping upward, tried valiantly to beat her way into the air and intercept them.

"Mount, Kathang!" she cried. "Mount—"

It was clearly all but impossible for her to take off from a level surface. Yet she managed to gain half her own height in the air and meet the first attacker. He struck out at her—not with the polished dowels on his heels but with one of his wide wings. His wing and hers came together with a booming sound like the note of an enormous kettledrum. Anvra tumbled backward in mid-air, fell to the ground.

She was out of the fight. But at least she had diverted one of the enemy. The second came diving through the air, dowels-first, at Doug's head.

He ducked, crouching under the driving dowel-ends, then leaped swiftly to catch a sweeping wingtip in both hands and swing his weight on it.

The attacker floundered and fell, giving a hoarse, gargling shout. He rolled on the pavement, threshing reflexively with the wing Doug had not touched. The other hung rigid, propped at a strange angle, half-dragged out of its socket.

Doug looked for the first attacker, could not see him. Once more he ducked—and probably saved his life. A tremendous double hammer seemed to smash into his head sending him half-unconscious to the pavement. On hands and knees he saw the first attacker, still airborne, circling to strike again.

Doug was recovering his wits. Crouching, he saw the attacker swooping upon him now, swelling suddenly large before him. Gathering himself for a supreme effort, Doug waited until the last second—and sprang.

He cleared the in-driving dowel-ends, his body slamming hard against the attacker. The creature's flailing wing caught on the pavement. Both went down. Rolling over on the winged man, Doug stiffened his hand for a karate blow and chopped downward with it, edge-on.

He had aimed at the point where the side of the other's neck met the collar bone, but he missed his target and slammed hard instead into the ribs of the upper chest. A sudden wave of agony shot up his arm.

He looked at his hand in amazement as he rolled free of the attacker. The smallest of three fingers was bent in against his palm at an unnatural angle. When he tried to move the other fingers, a needle-like twinge of pain ran up his arm.

The man he had struck was now lying back on his half-folded wings, shuddering slightly. The whole right side of his chest was caved in, as if by a sledgehammer. A bloody froth showed on his lips.

Staring from the obviously dying man to his own ruined hand, Doug made an effort to get to his feet, remembering something about birds back on Earth.

"Bones..." he croaked to himself. "Hollow..."

Now upright, he moved toward the dying enemy to find out if this were true. But at the first step, sky and square tilted and went around him as if he were on a carousel. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the pavement, looking up into the face of Anvra. On his other side stood an old winged man dressed in black, his face lined and narrow.

". . .he bet himself on one of the fighters," Anvra was saying, looking up at the man in black, "and the fighter was forced to the pavement. So they prepared Kathang for transfer. But after his soul was transferred, he dodged the kill-blow and the other fighter hurt himself on the pavement. The other wasn't able to rise but Kathang was—and that made him winner. But he was in the body of the fighter he bet on."

"Nonetheless, mistress," said the old man, slowly and deeply, "the body he wears belongs to the Cadda Noyer. It's their fighter's body."

"It was a beaten body—a dead body until he saved it."

"That goes beyond present discussion." The old man shook his head. "It will have to be decided by a full panel of the Magi. I'll set a date."

He looked down at Doug.

"Kathang DuLein," he said, in his deep voice, "the Cadda Noyer can't be restrained from attempting to recover the body you inhabit. As a Magus, I can give you no protection. I recommend you to the protection of your Aerie Brothers."

"He has none," said Anvra quickly. "He gambled away his Brotherhood rights in the Sorcerers. But I'm a Water Witch—I can find him mate-sanctuary temporarily in one of our Aeries."

"Then I recomment you, DuLein," said the old man, "to the protection of your contract-mate, Mistress Anvra Mons-Borroh."

He turned and stepped away, revealing two other winged men wearing silver and black, like that of Anvra's costume.

"Can we help you, Sister?" one of them asked.

"Where were you when I whistled?" began Anvra sharply, then checked herself. "Forgive me, Brothers. I'm still wound up from the attack. Help me get him to out nearest Aerie, will you? I can't carry him alone."

Anvra's voice and the scene about him was lost in a sudden flooding of nothingness, with one a brief shadow-glimpse of the Walker watching him.

II

HE woke gradually. He squinted and raised his right hand to brush the haze from his eyes.

But his right hand was heavier than it should be. With an effort he heaved it up and saw a clumsy lump of something that looked like a ball of cloth soaked in concrete. A cast, he realized.

He remembered the fight with the two winged men then, and jerked himself up on one elbow to see about him.

He lay on what seemed to be a bed in a semi-circular room open to the air all along its flat side. Several backless armchairs stood about and from the chipped stone of the wall extended objects looking like water-faucet handles in either silver or black. Nowhere in the wall was any door visible.

His bed was at the open edge of the room—almost overhanging it in fact. There was no barrier or guard rail. He turned to look out...

He stared down at the tops of toylike buildings several hundred feet below him, stretching away like a sea as far as the horizon. Rising out of this sea at something like quarter-mile intervals were huge towers—and it was plain that the room where he lay was a tower.

It was an impossible scene, like something discovered in a nightmare. Were those buildings below him the structures among which he had been running?

A faint click made his head turn.

The wall had opened to reveal a door. Coming through it was Anvra Mons-Borroh. The door closed behind her, its outline becoming invisible once more.

"You woke early," she said. Her voice was rather cold. It lacked the concern that had been in it when she had first warned him about the Cadda Noyer. "Kathang wouldn't have recovered from the sedative that fast."

"You know I'm not this Kathang, then?" he asked, gazing up at her curiously.

"I don't know anything!" Her voice sharpened. "Except that Kathang was my contract-mate, and that my self-obligation holds until I have proof you're someone else."

"You don't need proof," he said emptily. I'm not your Kathang."

"You could be, and not in your right mind." She stared at him brilliantly out of wide brown eyes. "Who did you say you are?"

"My name's Bai—" Once more the pronunciation defeated him. "Anyway, I don't know how I happened to be in what's-his-name's ... Kathang's...body. But where I come from we don't have wings."

HE told her all of what had happened to him as he remembered it. She listened patiently. When he was finished, she nodded.

"Yes," she said. "It's what you said under sedation."

She turned from him and walked back to the wall, which opened before her.



"Sirs," she said, "Will you come in now?"

Two winged men answered her invitation. The first was small for a male, and dark-haired, his right wing deformed and patently useless. Doug's vision seemed to blur again as he looked at the samller winged man. But it was not a general blurring, he noticed. The others, the rest of the room, remained sharp and clear. Only the small man was blurred in features and outline—and stayed that way. Doug looked over at the larger newcomer. His body was as big as the one Doug himself was now inhabiting. Both visitors wore close-fitting suits of dark red with a yellow lozenge over the heart.

"Mistress. . ." said the smaller one, bending his head briefly to her. "May I present our Master of Aerie 84? Master Sorcerer Jax duHorrel."

"Sir." She bent her head. "Will you both sit?"

The two picked up backless armchairs and carried them to Doug's bed. They sat down, staring at him. Anvra remained standing.

"Kathang," said the smaller man with the deformed wing, "don't you know me? We're Aerie Brothers. You must remember me—Etam duRel? And Jax, our Aerie Master?"

"No Aerie Brother of ours, Brother. No longer," said the man called Jax grimly. "Remember that, Etam!"

He turned to Anyra.

"I could wish you a better contract-mate, mistress," he said.

"Thank you," she said. "You heard him tell about himself?"

Jax nodded. "It's the planet of the damned he's fantasy-making about, all right," said the big Aerie Master of the Sorcerers. "It's real enough, even if it is on another plane. They're all wingless there, slaves crawling about the surface just the way he describes it. It's exactly the sort of self-torturing fantasy a weak man like Kathang would pick."

"Sir!" Anvra's voice had an edge to it. "The name of duLein is an honorable one. It's my contract-mate you're speaking of."

"Apologies, mistress," said Jax stiffly. "But you've no self-obligation to a man you believe not contracted to you."

"Until I have proof," snapped Anvra, "my self-obligation holds. We women don't shed our contract-duties as lightly as some men shed the duties of their Brotherhood."

As they glared at each other, Anvra's wings half-spread, Doug Bailey found his tongue.

"Wait a minute," he said "Let me hear that again—you know where I come fron?"

Anvra and the two men turned back to face him. "Kathang..." Etam duRel patted Doug gently on the arm. His blurred features leaned down toward Doug; his voice sounded blurred but understandable in Doug's ears. "Don't you remember how we were two of the workers on the construction of the Portal? Think! There were other planets we opened the Portal to besides Damned World. Remember the world that was all shallow ocean, and the transparent bodies of the water-creatures we recovered from it?"

"What's the use of trying to explain to a madman, Etam?" grumbled Jax. "To remember what you ask, he'd have to abandon his fantasy. He's incurable. He should be quietly put out of the way—"

"That decision's not yours to make, Aerie Master," said Anvra. "When he sold off his right to protection by the Sorcerers, he also took back the right of Sorcerers to judge or condemn him."

"Yes, if he's Kathang," Jax admitted. "You got us here because you think he actually is from the Damned World. Isn't that right?" "I don't believe—or disbelieve." said Anvra stiffly.

Etam spoke. "Why do you doubt he's Kathang, Mistress?"

"Because of the things he's done," Anvra answered. "Things I, as contract-mate, happen to know Kathang would not do. For example, Kathang was no public coward; not, at least, to the point of having his wings cut off and being sentenced to the sewers. But there were braver men—"

Her gaze flashed suddenly, warningly, at Jax.

"I can say that about Kathang, Aerie Master, because my selfobligation still holds," she interrupted herself. "You cannot, in my presence, because your Brotherhood is broken. I say, frankly, that there were braver men than Kathang duLein, even if he is the last to bear the ancient and honorable name of the duLeins. This man I aided against two Cadda Noyer is one of the bravest."

AX rose from his chair.

"And this is all you have to tell us, then?" he asked Anvra. "You brought us here simply because you think Kathang is acting more courageously than he used to?"

"Look at what he did," blazed Anvra, ruffling her wings, glaring

up at the big man. "Kathang's soul was legally transferred into the body of a fighter about to die, so that the fighter could be preserved in Kathang's body. But Kathang didn't perish with the dead body. Instead he activated the body and defeated a professional fighter! Kathang—who in the gym never wore anything but padded dowels!"

"Even that can happen by accident—"

"Then how about the two Cadda Noyer bullies?" she demanded. "He also defeated them. He even killed one—"

"I understand you helped."

"I?" Anvra laughed scornfully. "A small woman? I tell you he defeated them both himself. He actually crushed one's chest, ruining his own hand in the process. What ordinary man—let alone Kathang—could strike a blow like that? Sirs, you're blind if you don't see something more here than a man out of his mind with the effects of an incompleted transfer spell."

Jax shook his head.

"As Kathang must have told you when he was sane and a Sorcerer," Jax said, "only dead specimens can be recovered from other worlds through the Portal."

"But a soul—" she began.

"Can only be transferred from another plane by a spell operating on that plane."

Jax held up his hand to Anvra as she was about to interrupt him passionately.

"We know," he said, "that Kathang was in his own body before the spell was begun. We know the spell sent him into the body of a fighter facing what looked like certain death. He had to obey that spell. So—he went into the fighter's body."

"That has to be true," put in Etam, rising also from his chair and speaking earnestly to Anvra. "Kathang couldn't have moved into the fighter's body unless the fighter were already dead—or anticipating death so strongly he was as good as dying. The soul in any healthy, living body is too strong to be ousted—you know that. That's why we can't pull anything but dead or dying animals through a Portal. All right, the fighter was essentially dead. If you're correct in what you think, that left two bodies and two floating identities—Kathang's and the stranger's."

"What's your point?"

"Well, mistress, if the stranger beat Kathang into the Fighter's body, that left Kathang with only one place to go—back to his own body, which was perfectly usable, since the transfer spell only drives out the soul temporarily. If you're right, and a stranger from the Damned World is inhabiting this body here with us, then Kathang also has to be alive and in his own body somewhere. But I was told Kathang's body died immediately and was carted away by the Cadda Noyer for disposal. So Jax is right, you know, mistress. Your idea of a stranger in Kathang's body is an impossibility. It has to be Kathang on the bed here—even if he is insane and doesn't recognize himself."

They left, the door of the room opening and then shutting behind them. Anvra stood staring after them, her wings ruffling slightly.

"What was that?" demanded Doug. "That business about if I'm crazy, I ought to be put of the way quietly?"

Anvra turned.

"The insane can't be allowed to live at large and become a danger to the community, Kathang," she answered in level tones.

"You know that. You may not have a Brotherhood to take the responsibility of amputating your wings and locking you up—but the Magi will do it, if necessary. Unless you can be made sane."

"I never felt saner," he told her. "Come to think of it, I never felt more alive—" He broke off suddenly, staring closely at her. "If you don't think I'm Kathang, you're going to a lot of trouble to help a stranger."

"A stranger?" Her eyebrows lifted. "Kathang, you know better than that!"

"But I'm not Kathang and I don't know," he answered goodhumoredly. "That's right, isn't it? Think about it for a minute. If I wasn't Kathang, I wouldn't know—is that correct?"

Anvra thought it over. "All right, I'll talk to you as if you really are a stranger from some other place. What I'm doing isn't for you. If you're Kathang, you know that I wasn't going to renew our contract anyway—and you know why. If you aren't Kathang—" She hesitated. "What I'm doing, I'm doing out of respect to my honor and my duty of self-obligation. They demand of me that I help my contract-mate."

"But you don't believe I'm Kathang?" he pressed.

"No, I don't," she snapped at him. "Still, I'm not infallible. If

by some wild chance I'm wrong and it shoud turn out I'd abandoned you though you really are Kathang, my contract-mate, then I'd have failed in my self-obligation—and everything I believe in."

"I see," His thoughts raced. Whatever had happened to him during the transfer of souls, one thing was certain. He had been shaken up more by it, mentally and emotionally, than he had been by anything else in his life. His old bitterness, his indifference to death, were gone. He wanted to live—in fact, he intended to live.

"Help me, then," he said to Anvra.

"How?" She stared at him strangely. For all her snappishness and disclaimer of any interest in him other than as an insane Kathang, her eyes at times held a curious softness for him.

"Talk to me as if I were a stranger. Tell me things."

"For example?"

"What was I doing at that fight in the first place?"

"You had already gambled away all you had," she answered, "except your apprentice-fee in the Brotherhood of Sorcerers. You mortgaged that in a bet and lost it. Then you had nothing left except your life. So you bet that. You bet your body as a replacement for the fighter whose corner you were in. If he had won, you would have won—enough, that is, to buy back into the Sorcerers. But he lost."

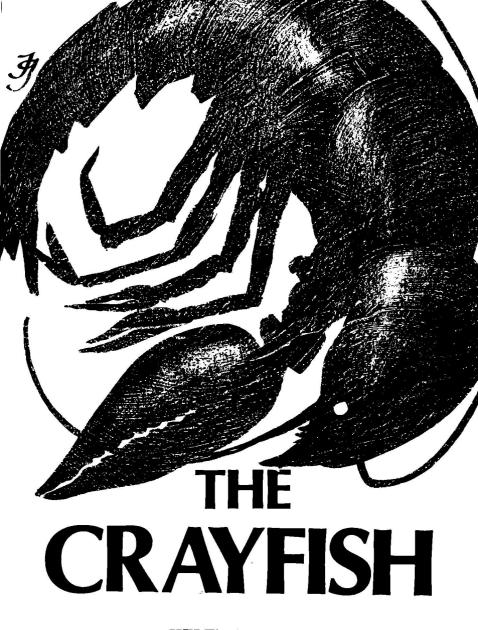
"The Cadda Noyer," he said. "Who are they?"

"They run the fights—among other things," she said. "One of the gray Brotherhoods. I'd never contract-mate myself to a Cadda Noyer. Some day the Magi will declare them outlaws for any member of the community to kill on sight. But for now they're tolerated. It was the Cadda Noyer from whom you stole that fighter-trained body. They'll be waiting outside this Aerie now for the six days of grace to expire. Then my Brotherhood will have to make you leave. Your own Brotherhood could have given you sanctuary indefinitely. They could even have bought off the Cadda Noyer—maybe."

"Maybe." Doug added, "So you can change bodies any time you want, in this world of yours?"

"Change---" The sharp note in her voice brought his eyes back to her face. She was all but glaring at him, as she had glared at Jax. Suddenly conscious of having to look up to her, he swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose unsteadily to his feet.

(Please turn to page 97)



HELEN ARVONEN

CHARLIE BOYD came in, and when he opened the door I could hear Lake Superior boisterously nudging the nails from the dock outside my beach cabin, where an early pension keeps me happily, if not always comfortably, retired.

He helped himself to a late-night cup of coffee, then slumped down beside me. It's his habit to impose on the friendship he has claimed since he came to the desk next to me, just before I left the newspaper.

I kept on reading, because Charlie's problems are always the same. Women, Perhaps, like Mérimée, I unite curiosity with indifference. Whether that is a strength or a weakness I cannot say.

"You know I have been seeing Jane Rutledge."

Jane lives across the stream and past the bushes, next to me. I am still surprised by the relationship that developed between Jane and Charlie after he visited to swim a few times.

"Well," he said heavily, "Jane thinks she's turning into a cray-fish."

"I warned you," I said absently. Stendhal irritates me at times, but I have only to reread La Chartreuse de Parma to be mollified by the cool clarity of his genius. "Those introverted girls get really serious. So if she's only crabby, you're fortunate," I continued, hoping he would go away. "Her mother came up here once last year, and she's enough to drive the whole human race back into the sea."

"Jane says she's turning into a crayfish," he repeated, knuckling the thick black hair. "She's dead serious."

The original good-time Charlie had finally stirred up a fine kettle of fish. Or perhaps I should say pot of chowder. I sighed, put down my book. "If she's really having delusions, you'd better take her up the way to see old Doc Malabar."

"She's got a grudge against doctors from away back. Anyway, Malabar says he summers up here to paint and get away from people who want diagnoses on the side."

"There's always a reason for such fantasies," I remarked. "What are her problems, Charlie?" Other than you, was implicit in what I said.

"She was pregnant at sixteen," Charlie told me. "She was a shy kid—and no communication with her folks. Anyway, the boy went

back to school and her mother arranged an abortion down east. A bad, bungled business, that. Left her more loused up than ever, emotionally."

"She wanted the child?"

"Said she might have kept it if she had had the choice She wasn't given any. So she retreated, built a shell around herself—"

"A shell!" I observed. "You see? Psychologically speaking, she—wait." I reached for a reference book. "She's sick. Schizophrenia. It's characterized by unrealistic behavior dominated by private fantasies... a faulty reaction pattern to life problems that the organism hasn't been able to meet properly.

"There. Cause and effect. Jane's personality and environment, her past history, and—"

"A crayfish," he said gloomily. "Nothing ordinary about her private fantasies, is there?"

So we agreed that Jane should have psychotherapy, and also agreed that she wouldn't, and Charlie left me to my books and went his way. "Remember, withdrawal from the environment is the essence of her problem," I pointed out. "You've got to draw her back."

But I knew that she was going strictly nowhere in her travels with Charlie.

I took my book and walked up the stream the next morning to find Jane sitting, her feet in the icy water, intently studying a crayfish pincer cradled in her hands. You'll find discarded pincers often, lost during a moulting or in a fight with another crayfish.

"They're bloody little cannibals," I said aloud, before remembering that, from what Charlie had said, she was identifying herself with them. She held the cheliped in a curiously gentle fashion, so that I was prompted to add, "Don't worry. They're do-it-your-self experts—constricting muscles, severing themselves at their own joints, then healing easily, with regeneration of new appendages."

"Really?" she said, amused and mocking. She buried the claw. I noticed that her tanned hand, with its long narrow nails, looked puffy from the cold creek water. So did her face, especially around the eyes. I suspected she was spending a lot of time crying.



"What's the matter with you, anyway?" I demanded rudely, almost roughly. It was an accusation. Charlie had made me aware of her emotional difficulties, and I resented my need to try and help her.

She smiled thinly, looking at the book in my hand. "Perhaps, like Stendhal's Count Mosca, I do not know how to forget my sorrows."

Without another word she stood up, shrugged out of her beach robe, walked slowly, awkwardly, out into the choppy surf of the lake.

"That's too strong for you today," I called, but the involuntary cry went unheeded. After a minute she flung herself on her back and darted out rearward under the waves with a seemingly effortless stroke and remarkable speed.

THAT was early in September. Charlie phoned me about that time to say he was shipping out for Chicago. "I'm getting out," he said. "She's a real oddball. Good lord, first thing you know, I'll be as bad as she is."

Once, in late fall, Jane and I met on the beach at dawn. She looked startled, resentful. I wondered if she blamed me for influencing Charlie. Heaven knows, I've never encouraged him to get serious in these affairs of his. When I am enamored, it is pleasant to know I can shut my heroine away within a book and set her upon a shelf for my future pleasure.

Jane had a blanket draped serape style over her left shoulder and arm. She looked haggard, her skin pink and swollen as though she had a sunburn. Windburn, at that time of year.

She did not speak, just strode away stiffly. I saw no more of her all that winter, though on one occasion, worried about her despite myself, I pounded my knuckles off on her door. She never answered though I knew she was inside.

The first of the summer folks to arrive early in April, was Doc Malabar, who travels up from Michigan. He came over for coffee while his cabin was warming, and I spoke to him about Jane.

"Nice little thing. Painfully shy. Been worrying about her," he said reflectively.

"Worrying?"

"Told her she should see her family doctor for treatment."

"A psychiatrist would be better, don't you think?"

"Is she disturbed? Wouldn't wonder. But the steroids relieve much of the discomfort of scleroderma."

After he left, I looked it up. Scleroderma. A disease of the skin wherein it becomes hard, raised and rigid. A crippling disease, eventually.

It was dreadful, of course. To all intents and purposes Jane was developing her own exoskeleton. Just like a crustacean. One had only to combine it with her emotional problems, and the end result was evident—and explained.

I felt guilty about it all. Perhaps I had influenced Charlie a little. And I was remembering what Jane had said about being unable to forget her sorrows. In perspective, it was a singularly revealing statement.

I put a call through and finally, late that night, I was able to get Charlie at the address on the last card he had sent me. I suggested that he come back long enough to see that Jane got the professional help she needed.

"That was finished last summer," he said flatly, "I'm out and damned glad of it. She scared the hell out of me."

"That's why you've got to come back. You're the only one—"

But Charlie wasn't having any. When I hung up, I was actually sick about it all. I looked down the beach, and thought of her there, locked in her shell, developing her own coat of armor.

THE fire went out toward morning. I got up, took the hand axe to chop kindling.

I walked to the end of the dock, almost convinced that I had only to walk off the end to mount and wade through fog banks that set borders against sight and sound and sensation. It was a Pierre Loti sea with a semblance of non-existence, or a world either finished or not yet created.

I fingered my axe, looked down into the murky water suffused now with a dim, pale light.

And I saw a crayfish, perhaps five feet four inches long!

"God," I cried, hammering a rusted bolt into the frail and ten-

uous joints of morning. I crouched lower, hatchet in cramped hand, straining to see into the depths now becoming turgid and confused. If discovered it swims away quickly, stirring up mud with its tail. I remembered that from my reading.

Yet for a fleeting moment I had seen it, surely. Greenish-brown and tan against the sandy bottom. Great compound eyes waving on stalks, antennules testing, huge chelipeds restless and angry.

And, if I had not seen it, why was I remembering that the creature had had one short, underdeveloped pincer? A left pincer. As though it had lost it during a moulting, and regeneration was not complete as yet.

THAT was several weeks ago. Despite the cold spring, I have not seen smoke from Jane's cabin. Last night I felt my neck hairs stir with a revival of ancient fears and ancient instincts as the radio spewed the news. A Lake Superior fisherman apparently fell from his launch early today. His body, shredded and minced, was found a short time later. Investigation is continuing.

Bloody little cannibals, I had said that day. And if they were motivated by human intelligence and hatred . . . ?

Impossible, of course. Crayfish don't grow to that size. But if they do, it—or she—would have to leave the stream and go out into the lake.

I've stayed away from the dock and the waterfront. Still, cray-fish are land creatures, too. I'd like to warn Dr. Malabar but then the old man would accuse *me* of being a hallucinating paranoid, and—what's the use, anyway? Lake Superior covers a big area.

It needs to.

I see that one reference book says a crayfish has one to five hundred eggs. Another book quotes two to four hundred. Give or take a hundred or so, that's more than enough.

Good God, what is loose in Superior?

Because when I talked to Charlie, he said, "It's not just that she's a kook from away back, but—"

The perspiration pebbles my forehead as I remember,

"Man, I had to get out from under. Jane is pregnant, you know."

Out of sight isn't always out of mind—though it's a good way to lose your mind . . .



OH SAY,

CAN YOU SEE?

ERIK van LHIN



NOW, don't get me wrong. There was nothing radical about me before I heard of *Poof*. When they planned to raise my taxes for that swimming pool for the women teachers, I wasn't going to kick. I was in favor of education. The only reason I joined the protest at the Board of Ed meeting was that Lucy threatened never to speak to me again, meaning she would not shut up unless I went. Anyhow, the protest didn't come to much. They raised the taxes the next year to finance a library wing to replace the room they had converted to a smoking lounge.

You would have said I was a pretty ordinary guy—a cut above average, but ordinary. I had a good job at the agency, handling cosmetic accounts, with a raise due again in another few months. The guys on the train just called me Pete, none of this Mister Phillips or double initial stuff. I had been commuting since buying the ranchhouse right after we got married six—no, five—years ago. We had a two-year-old hardtop with air, a color TV—Lucy was wild about color at first—a big pink freezer, a riding mower: the works. We were even talking about starting a family.

But by bad luck, a news photo showing me at the protest got in the paper. The boss saw it. After that whenever a known nut appeared I had to deal with him. Like the one who wanted thirty days' credit for a campaign announcing the end of the world in three weeks.

And like the one now waiting in the reception room to see me.

Leafing through the typed pages the girl had brought in, I groaned. Another cure for baldness! The public has grown too sophisticated for advertising such stuff in the mass media. But pinned to the presentation were a card listing Paul Aracelsus as president of Wizard Cosmetics and a hand-written note: At the club luncheon today, your wife suggested I consult your firm. Oh, well...

When Aracelsus was shown in he looked normal enough. About fifty, lean, clothed in excellent taste. Even the small dark beard was all right for anyone not working in my agency. He did not take my proffered hand, instead responded with a complicated gesture that seemed almost ritualistic. Strangely, that did not bother me. I found myself beginning to like him.

"I handle the advertising for most of my products myself," he

told me. "But *Hair Today* is for the male market, and I'm less familiar with that."

"I'm afraid, Mr. Aracelsus..."

"Dr. Aracelsus. Magna cum laude in chemistry from Heidelberg. Another degree from the University of Lhasa in metaphysics. Before the Chinese seized Tibet, of course. And I know all about ordinary hair tonics. Mine, however, will restore hair every time—and quickly."

He was tactful, in a way. I'm a guy who might be called prematurely bald, but his eyes neither studied nor avoided my scalp. I tried to be equally tactful as I began outlining our policy on untried products. Suddenly I saw he was stripped to the waist. I had not noticed him removing even his jacket.

"Forget my chest," he said. "Anyone might grow hair there. Look at my back."

Curly hair at least an inch long covered him from shoulders to waist. The only trouble was—the stuff looked dark green!

He smiled. "A bit startling, I realize. A slight error in an early experiment, now happily corrected. The new growth is normal in color, you'll notice."

"I'm afraid..." I began again, and maybe I was a little.

He grimaced, picked up his clothes and moved behind me. But not because he wished to dress privately, as I discovered when a cold wet spray hit the half-naked top of my head.

Aracelsus stepped around the disk, fully clothed again. "It will dry in a few minutes, Mr. Phillips. When you're convinced my product has merit, I suggest you call me."

By the time the door was closing on him, my previous liking was gone. I sat there trying to wipe the goo off my head and swearing at the reporter who had photographed me at the wrong time. I even thought up a few choice terms for Lucy, who had sent his mountebank with his cheap sleight of hand to see me.

But most of my resentment wore off in the club car going home. The goo had dried up and had left no stain or anything.

LUCY was all right, really. Sort of a blonde, big eyes, nice figure even without her girdle, pretty smile. The boss had met her a couple of times and kept asking after her. Yeah, he was one of those.

Lucy used to be a lot of fun on a date, too, in our younger days—though I never thought much about marriage then. Later I learned that all women are the same. Scratch any single girl and you'll find a wife coiled up inside her just waiting to strike. But we got on pretty well. At least we did until the *Poof* business started.

Lucy brought up her bright idea the usual way. She had the table set and drinks in the refrigerator when she drove me home from the station. By the time the gin went to work on top of what I had imbibed on the train, she was serving up roast beef rare and real mashed potatoes. Sure, I was suspicious by then. I figured she was moving up that fur stole from Christmas to her birthday. And when she seemed to listen when I spoke of happenings at the office, I was sure. But the dinner sort of made up for it. You get used to things like that.

She went into action over coffee in the living room. "Pete, I saw the most fantastic thing today! At the lunch. It was Helen Brewster's turn to be hostess—and she promised it would be just out of this world. Well, it was. Everybody's talking about it."

"You mean some show this Aracelsus put on for you? I don't care for his brand of trickery. Did I tell you that he...?"

"I don't mean his levitating. I know about that. But he demonstrated a new vanishing cream..."

I snorted. "You've a dozen different jars of such stuff already, Lucy."

"Not like this cream. And it costs only thirty dollars."

"Thirty! Look, Lu," I tried to reason with her, "they're all the same. Believe me, I know. I write the copy. What's his gunk called?"

"Poof," she said. "And it's nothing like those usual rejuvenating creams. This really works. Anyway, I'll bet you never even heard of it. So how can you judge it?"

She had me there, and she knew it. With my connections you would think I had heard of everything but this product was new to me. That proved nothing, but I knew I had lost the round. I fell back on basic-basic. "Then it will have to come out of your allowance. I'm short this week."

Her eyes were large and serious now. "I spent all my money on your old roast beef. Prices are out of sight. And I know you had two twenties this morning. I saw them—when I was brushing your

suit so you would look nice, not have to rush for the train and—"

"That forty," I told her, "is what we agreed I could use for the spinning reel the boss recommended. There's an off-season sale this week."

"Oh." She softened, went all over wifely-tender. "Oh, Pete, I'm sorry. If I had only known... Anyhow, it's getting late. Let's forget it and have one more drink."

A man does not win many victories that easily, not after the first year of marriage. I figure wives have some sort of union. You take the average wife I meet. She is not exactly dumb, of course. Somehow, she got through school as fast as I did. But just try explaining baseball or a carburetor—or a bank statement. She probably can't even change nozzles on her vacuum cleaner. Yet every time you have a good argument, she's miles ahead of you. They must get together at those club functions to exchange ideas until they've got you covered. You're not matching wits with one wife but with the whole tribe. It has to be that way. Anyhow, a man doesn't win very often. I should have been on my guard.

About five minutes after we turned out the lights, she sort of rolled over in her bed and looked across at me. "Pete," she whispered, "are you asleep?"

"No."

"Feel like company?"

So she got the twenties.

On the train in the morning, I sat next to Brewster. He's two or three echelons above me at the agency. He must have had a bad time with Helen. He hardly said a word during the whole ride.

П

NOBODY at our firm knew anything about the new gunk except that it was expensive. Helen Brewster had spread the word among all the wives, of course. When she went on a kick, the others had to ride along. Oh, there was a rumor about some crazy slogan, or some such. But nothing else. One guy did clam up as if he had inside information—but he was in the perfume department, not cosmetics.

Later that morning, after I had been asking around, our best account came storming in. He wanted me to drop everything and play plant-relations man for him. That was not my job. But I knew better than to refuse. It seemed some other firm was putting touch-up dye in their wave-set spray, and his consulting chemist had refused to tell him how to do the same—some nonsense about allergic reactions. The account used up the rest of the day and made me an hour late getting out. Which meant I would miss the club car and maybe have to stand all the way home.

But I spotted a vacancy. A window seat right beside Brewster. I figured he had seen me rushing up and saved it. So I headed for him, thinking he might be glad for company to take his mind off his troubles. He worked late only when things were really rough at home.

He shot to his feet as I got to him but did not move aside to let me in. He just stood there, waving a pudgy hand toward a ticket in the slot, turning red, muttering something I could not understand. I shrugged. Hell with him. I moved away and was lucky enough to find a vacancy a couple of seats back.

Why was Brewster so agitated? I've been left holding a seat for some woman who had to go forward, though they usually leave a mess on the seat to show they are occupying it. So what?

Brewster was really in a sweat. He kept popping up and down, looking sicker and sicker until the train pulled out. Nobody came for the seat, and Brewster just sat hunched there, moving his lips as if he were talking to himself and sometimes puffing on a cigarette. Funny, I had never seen him smoke before. I thought Helen was the chimney in the family. He was really nervous! At Jamaica, some woman got nasty about the seat though there were a few other vacancies by then. Usually Brewster can't stand up to a woman but this time he was tough even when she threatened to call the conductor. Eventually she gave up.

And still nobody came to reclaim the seat.

It puzzled me, until I remembered those commuter romance things you run into. Then it all fitted. Brewster certainly had got the girl off to the little girls' room in a hurry, after the shock of having a next-door neighbor turn up. He probably expected I would find another car. When I sat in sight of him, his plan was ruined. And now she could not come out without looking too suspicious. No wonder he looked sick.

I could not entirely blame him, though there was nothing wrong with what he had at home if he had known how to manage it. Helen Brewster was one of those well-rounded, sort of sulky brunettes. She wore miniskirts or those shorts-and-halter things and she had a way of looking at you. . . Well, anyway, she was quite a dish and with the right-size cup to match.

I wondered what Lucy would make of this. There was nothing she liked better than gossiping about the neighbors.

Surprisingly, she was not waiting at the station. Ever since that chatter hall they called a tea room had opened across the street, she had been meeting me regularly. But not this time. I waited until Brewster finally staggered down the steps—literally staggered, as if he were carrying a heavy load. But he did not even answer my hail. So I took a cab. I had trouble getting one, too; a lot of the other guys must have been stood up, which seemed kind of odd.

I was already yelling for Lucy when I let myself into the house. But there was no answer and no sight of her anywhere. Her stockings were soaking in the lavatory and the water was warm; she could not still be shopping. Nor was she at the Brewsters, since the main lights were all out over there. I started to hunt for a note but the place was like a hothouse and I needed a drink. I cut down the thermostat and headed for the kitchen.

When you come right down to it, women don't belong in the kitchen. They don't understand efficient methods and you can't teach them anything, either. Give one some crazy habit of work and she's set for life. Like rinsing things under the faucet instead of using the hot spray. Or soaking dishes. They must figure that what's good for their underthings must work well on dishes. Buy them an automatic dishwasher and you'll still find the sink full of soaking plates and knives any time you look—the colder and slimier the water, the better.

I was just bracing myself to fish out my mixing tools when I heard a giggle behind me. I jerked around and damned near had a heart attack.

Standing in front of me, smoking itself, was a cigarette[†] Right in mid-air. Smoke swirled down in a roundish cloud, stopped, then puffed out in a little jet. "Hi, Pete," the cigarette said.

Don't tell me me don't faint. I passed out cold.

Next thing I knew, I was on the couch. How I got there, I don't know. Lucy has trouble lifting a full pot of water from the stove. But there I was, off the floor and thirty feet from where I had gone under. There was an arm under my neck and Lucy's voice in my ears, saying something about the dishes in the sink, and my fault because I'd forgotten the garbage again, and if I didn't speak to her at once she'd get mad! It was Lucy, all right. But she still wasn't there.

"I knew it," I groaned. "I said you'd get killed driving with one hand and not watching the road. Now that you're dead, maybe you'll listen next time!"

"Don't be silly, Pete," her voice said. "I'm not dead at all. I'm just invisible."

"You're-what?"

"Invisible. Like I told you last night." She giggled, as if I were being silly about the whole thing. The couch shook and made depressions as a cigarette and lighter did indecent things in the air. Something blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Like you told me what last night?"

"You know, *Poof*. The vanishing cream. Helen brought my order about noon." The cigarette started for the kitchen. "What you need is a drink, Pete. And you'd better set the table and turn on the oven while I get rid of all these dishes."

"You might as well, after they've been sitting in that water," I told her automatically. She did not even bother to snort.

The freezer door swung open and two TV dinners wriggled out before the freezer shut itself again. "How about roast turkey? Or would you like fried chicken better? I guess chicken."

She spent some of the time running tepid water over the dishes and stacking them helter-skelter to drain. That did not bother me. What did was expecting to step on her whenever I moved. There was no sound of her feet on the tile floor, and she never bothered to announce when she was going to be right in my way. I was in a cold sweat by the time dinner was ready. Or maybe not so cold. I noticed the thermostat was up again.

It took more than one drink to let me eat while watching her—or not watching her. Chicken should be chewed and not seen during (Please turn to page 135)

Unmistakably Henry

JEAN CAVRELL

Witches are sometimes lovely, and sometimes they fall in love!

THE wind rose high that Halloween. It blew the smoke of chimneys into monstrous, unimaginable shapes. It lifted the heavy slates from silo roofs and dashed them into slivers against the points of rocks miles away. It lashed Lake Michigan into waves that swallowed helpless fishing boats. The sound of it alone made widows hide beneath their beds and frightened cattle huddle hip to hip in creaking barns.

The wind blew the strongest toward the Black Hawk Mountains of the North, whose barren pitted rocks are hiding more than they will ever tell.

If you could have clung to the topmost pinnacle of Jensen's Crag that night, you would have seen her silhouetted in the sky: Serena, on her broomstick, her red-gold hair streaming dark against the pale-gold, round-gold moon.

Three times she circled the peak before she could maneuver the broom to the landing place on the leeward ledge where the cauldron stood beside that handy little waterfall where they always met.

She wheezed as she got off the broom. The youngest of the three sisters, she was a little more plump than the year before but still

able to steer her course in any kind of gale the powers chose to send.

Tonight she was the first to arrive. That was no surprise. Hetty, the oldest sister, had farthest to come—all the way from Madison—and she liked to be last and make an entrance.

This year, their meeting was about getting rid of Ida's husband, George, so Ida had to be late. She had to look reluctant even if she were not.

Serena leaned the broom into the crevice between the two gray rocks, made sure it was wedged tight. It was a long walk home to Chippewa Falls without the broom.

Next to it she tucked the stained grocery bag of ingredients for the spell.

Then she stretched her arms way up. It felt so good to be here again. Sisters ought to get together more than once a year, she thought. Her hat blew off and started down the mountain. She snapped her fingers and summoned it back.

The moon was a perfect circle tonight. Where Serena stood she could almost touch it. She stretched out farther, farther, calling, "Hecateeeeeeeee."

A dog in the valley howled.

"Hecateeeeeeee."

Another dog joined him, and another.

"Hecateeeeeeee!"

A barely audible roll of thunder was both answer and command. She ought to see to the cauldron and get the fire started.

She pried off the lid and set it down. The inside of the cauldron was clean as a whistle. Nothing like leaving your equipment in good order.

There were the bucket and long-handled bird's-eye maple spoons all ready to be used. She laid out the spoons beside her broom.

"Hecate's orders," she said to the bucket. It floated over to the waterfall, filled itself, emptied itself into the cauldron while Serena bent down to clear away the year's debris from under the grate.

Her hair bothered her, falling into her eyes, so she snapped her fingers and produced a rubberband to hold it. The hair was coarse now and a little dry—after so many years of dying it bright redgold. She felt it was not dignified to wear it long and loose.

"After all, Henry," she would tell her husband, "I'm not a schoolgirl any more."

But he would kiss her and answer, "That's how I like it. You're my red-haired witch, aren't you?"

Serena always giggled when he called her that. He would never know how right he was. She had never told him. She did not think she would be able to tell him even if she wanted to.

Imagine, after twenty-six, no twenty-nine years of marriage, being called "my red-haired witch" by your own husband.

The bucket floated over to the crevice and came to rest.

"Serena!"

She looked up and there was Ida, finally.

"I've done half the work already," Serena greeted her.

"Serena, you're just as pretty as ever, but you never could start a fire." Ida grinned as she dismounted. Her broom handle creaked and straightened out as she got off. She was enormous every way—tall, broad, fat.

"Did you get the wood?" Ida asked.

"Not yet."

Ida stretched out her arm and pointed her finger at a dead pine tree below the ledge. Caaaaaarack! The trunk snapped in two.

Splitting up into logs, the timber sounded like peanut brittle.

Serena did the same thing over on the other side. "What have you been up to?" she called to Ida.

"Remember Sylvester Gilmore?"

"No."

"I burned his barn again," Ida cackled. "He's ruined."

"Good for you."

"I spoiled all the smoked fish in that warehouse in Green Bay."

"Living close to the lake, you get so many chances," Serena said wistfully.

They both bent over to lay the logs properly under the cauldron. Serena eased in a log just so.

Ida moved it to the left an inch. "You know, Serena," she said, "You're wasting your time piddling around with roses. You're letting happiness with Henry spoil your ambition."

"I raised some with thorns three inches long," offered Serena.

"What good is that? You ought to be going out more—tackling

something bigger than yourself. It's just as well we're getting rid of Henry next year and starting over."

"I want to talk about that when Hetty gets here," said Serena.

Ida shot her a look. "What do you mean?"

The sighing wind rose to a high, shrill whine. "That can only be Hetty," said Serena, standing up.

"Must be," said Ida.

Higher, shriller, louder grew the sound as they watched a far-away black dot grow larger until it was, indeed, Hetty on her broom. She circled the peak to slow her speed, and when she finally came to rest, softly, lightly, like dandelion seed, the wind, too, was hushed and silent.

Hetty was tallest of the sisters, thin, closely resembling Hecate, their mother. Hetty's face reminded one of an eagle's even when she smiled, as she was doing now because she was so glad to see her sisters.

She rested her broom in the crevice and strode over to the cauldron. "Let's start the fire," she said. "Be midnight 'fore you know it."

The three stood back, making a triangle with the cauldron in the middle. They stretched their left arms out, index fingers extended, held their breaths and looked skyward.

Lightning leaped from sky to log and back, the clap of thunder following. The logs beneath the cauldron smoldered and flamed.

They sat back on their heels, chins on hands, elbows on knees, waiting for midnight.

"How old is George now?" Hetty asked.

"Sixty-eight," Ida answered.

"That's long enough. He's not been cheated," Hetty said.

"Plenty long enough for him," agreed Ida.

"Henry's only fifty-six," Serena said with trembling lips.

"This meeting is about George," said Hetty acidly. "We'll talk about Henry next year, when his turn comes."

"How are your two boys?" asked Serena, to placate her.

"They'll soon be partners in the law firm."

"Pity sons can't be witches," said Ida, gloating a little. She had three daughters.

"Lawyers are the next best thing," Hetty said pleasantly. Then,

to Serena, "I wonder why you never had any children with Henry. You're always such a good mother. Still, that part's not up to us. Next time you'll make up for it."

"I've had a good life with Henry," said Serena.

"That's not the point, is it?" asked Ida. "Look how well my youngest is doing in Vietnam."

"How are your two older girls in Washington?" Hetty asked.

"Well, you can see," Ida answered proudly. "Don't you read the papers?"

"Water's boiling," Serena interrupted, nettled.

"So it is," said Hetty. "Twelve o'clock. Let's get to work."

They held their bags and circled the cauldron, dropping the ingredients in one by one.

Eye of newt and toe of frog, Serena chanted.

Ida spoke. Wool of bat and tongue of dog.

Hetty said softly, Finger of birth-strangled babe, ditch-delivered by a drab, make the gruel thick and slab.

The cauldron stood too tall for them to stir while on the ground so each one rose into the air until she could reach.

Hetty took a small glass vial from her pocket, uncorked it with her teeth, spat the cork into the cauldron, and flung the vial in after it, whispering: Cool it with a baboon's blood, then the charm is firm and good.

They all withdrew their spoons and backed away.

There was a moment's silence, then a gurgling from the cauldron as a cloud of steam rose into the air and was driven southeast by the wind. Southeast toward Marietta, to kill Ida's husband, George.

At the same moment the fire died out, and a cloud passed in front of the moon's eye. Serena, Ida and Hetty sank slowly to the ground.

"Well, that's done," said Ida, "Soon the three of us can turn young again, and start over."

"Not until Serena's rid of Henry," said Hetty, wiping her spoon.

"That's not until next year," said Serena.

Hetty kissed the air next to Ida's cheek and then Serena's. She mounted her broomstick and waved goodbye. "I'll be at the funeral to help," she called, as she soared away.

"When is the funeral?" asked Serena.

"Today's Thursday. Figure late Friday for the accident. Saturday, Sunday. On Monday or Tuesday. I'll let you know." Ida sat down on her broomstick, which creaked a protest.

"Better get that reinforced," shouted Serena as Ida took off.

Serena dropped her cleaned spoon into the cauldron with the others and stood aside while the bucket floated in. When she put the lid back on, the cauldron looked like any other rock.

The air smelled so clear and fresh, thought Serena, now that the wind had died down. What a lovely night to ride the sky.

GEORGE'S funeral took place late Monday afternoon. Ida and Serena and Hetty managed everything. They had done it so often it came easy.

They had not had to serve lunch but they did have to feed people something in return for going all the way to the cemetery and back, so there was coffee and tea and milk and cider and ham and blood sausage and roast goose and smoked fish and three kinds of cheese and lots of pie and cake.

The preacher was the last to leave. He sat in the parlor of the white house on Ida's dairy farm until every single other neighbor had gone home.

Of course he had gotten pretty wet, speaking at the grave for twenty minutes in the rain, nobody able to hear what he had to say because the wind was rising. By the time he had reached the Lord's Prayer, the mourners had not been able to hear even hear their own voices. All their words were blown away.

"I guess I'm dry enough to go out and get wet again," he said, lingering at the door. But nobody asked him to stay. Serena saw him to the porch while Hetty and Ida replenished the fire. No question, the evening was chilly.

"Time he went," said Hetty, sitting to take off her shoes.

"Don't sit there," snapped Ida. "That's George's chair."

"Shouldn't think he'd care much now," said Hetty, wriggling her toes.

"You're right," said Ida. "Each time I forget." She eased herself into the chair opposite Hetty. Ida was cross and tired. With real people around, you had to do all the work yourself. She looked

across the room to the long, food-laden, dirty-plate-strewn table. "You're a mess," she said, waving her hand. "Clean up."

The four corners of the tablecloth rose into the air until they met just under the chandelier. They lapped over, pulled into a knot, tighter, tighter, and vanished. The table dropped its extended leaves and the chairs backed into place against the walls.

"That's that," said Ida.

"You telling Serena, or shall I?" asked Hetty, pushing her footstool close to the fire.

"You're the oldest," said Ida, unlacing her boots.

Serena came back from the porch.

"What were you and the preacher going on about so long out there?" asked Hetty.

Serena grinned. "He wanted to know just how much the farm was worth. And then he asked me what you did, Hetty."

Hetty chuckled. "He's got his sights on a couple of rich widows."

The three of them cackled together in the firelight.

There was a pause, then Hetty asked Ida, "When's the next full moon?"

"Three weeks."

Serena, tensing, looked from one to the other. "What are we doing then?" she asked.

Hetty's glance was challenging. "Making the spell for your Henry," she said.

"It isn't time," Serena protested. "We always wait a year between."

"Hecate says get on with it,"

"Why?" asked Serena. "She's never rushed before."

"It's orders from above," said Hetty. "They want more witches faster now."

"But I want to keep Henry."

"You know you can't," said Ida.

"I could try," said Serena.

"Ida tried, remember?" said Hetty. "With that Trojan. What was his name?"

"Paris," said Ida softly.

"You fought us off a long time," Serena said.

"But afterward," muttered Hetty, wagging a bony finger.

"Afterward." breathed Ida with a shudder. "I would never fight again," she said.

"Never?" asked Serena.

"Never."

"Remember the fun of starting over, Serena?" asked Hetty.

"Remember the fun of being a young woman with a young man on a summer night?" asked Ida.

The three of them sighed.

"And where do you think we're starting over this time?" whee-dled Hetty.

"In China," coaxed Ida. "We've never been to China. You'll like it, Serena."

"In China you'll have lots of lovely, round, hungry babies," said Hetty.

"Witch babies with little moon-eyes sucking at your breasts," said Ida.

"China," whispered Serena. "I'd like that."

"It's settled, then," said Hetty, reaching for her shoes.

"No," Serena told her. "I want to keep Henry. We've been sweethearts twenty-seven years."

"Twenty-nine," Hetty snapped.

"You've always been confused," said Ida. "And you've never been very strong. You won't hold out a week."

"Why don't you go ahead without me?"

"You know we have to do it together," said Hetty. "That's what Hecate wants."

"Why?"

"Those are the orders they give her,"

"Who gives her?"

"We don't know."

"Does Hecate?"

"Yes. She does what she's supposed to do."

"I don't like that any more," said-Serena.

"It doesn't matter what you like," said Hetty. "We'll come for Henry when the moon is full."

"You'll either join us then," said Ida, "Or you'll have to fight us off."

"I won't let you kill him," said Serena.

"You'll have to, in the end," said Ida.

"I hope not," said Serena. "I love him."

HENRY and Serena sat on opposite sides of their living-room fire with their feet up, the way they did every night after supper. She was knitting and he was reading his paper.

In a few minutes the full moon would push its glowing curve above the line of the horizon and Hetty and Ida would come. Serena put down her knitting and went to check the door again. If only she had done enough.

She had had the boy who helped her with the garden spray the whole outside of the house with garlic juice. That would keep the sisters at bay for a while. Being near it made her own head ache.

She had put that spell, the one Hetty was always asking her for, across the chimney opening. She had been over every inch, every crack they might creep through.

She kept Henry home with her by telling him she was sick. Wednesday nights he usually went over the books at his lumber yard. How she would keep him inside the house the next night and the next—forever, if she were strong enough to fight them off—she did not know.

She sat down again and tried to knit, but her hands shook.

Henry lowered his paper, took off his reading glasses and watched her. "You really don't look well tonight," he said. "You've been so nervous since you got back from George's funeral. I didn't know you were that fond of him."

"I wasn't."

She looked at the gray hairs curled on Henry's temples right above his ears. If she had put them there herself they could not have been more exactly the way she liked them.

"Are you," he asked her, "upset because I didn't go along and help? You said you didn't want me at the funeral."

"It was better you stayed here," she said.

And his eyes. Serena felt Henry had the kindest eyes in the world. Hazel eyes. They must not go glazed and blank forever.

"Is it the thought of Ida that's bothering you?"

"It is," she said.

"Why don't we ask her to come visit? She must be lonely with-

out George to fight with." Henry grinned. "Tell her I'll fight with her if she wants."

Serena's hands shook until the needles clattered. She nodded without speaking.

THE wind that had circled the house all afternoon rustled through the ivy clinging to the red brick walls, searching, probing, hunting for a tiny crack. Poking every inch to make a hole.

The first pale shafts of moonlight sidled through the window to the floor.

Was that the wind in the leaves? Or Hetty's voice?

"Serena!"

And Ida. "Serena, open the door."

And Hetty, "We won't tell them you fought us if you open now."

And Ida, "You're not strong enough to fight us. You never were."

Serena held her hands over her ears. Her head ached more and her arms began to shake. Henry still watched her anxiously.

"Oh, Henry," she cried. "They're trying to confuse me."

Henry's arms went around her. "Who is?" he asked. "Your sisters outside?"

"Henry, you can hear them?" asked Serena.

"Yes."

The wind rose higher; the window panes rattled.

"Serena!" yelled Hetty. "It's time to go."

Serena felt better with Henry holding her. "How can you hear them now, when they're riding the wind?" she asked him.

"It's cold. I'll let them in," he said, standing up and walking toward the door.

Without his touch Serena's thoughts began to swirl. "Yes, let them in," she sighed, and then, "No, no! You mustn't."

"Whyever not?" Henry protested. He waited for her to explain.

"We don't get cold in the wind, Henry."

"You mean because you're witches?" Henry asked her, his hand on her head.

"How did you understand that?" With his hand there, she could almost think. "Did you always know?"

"The longer I loved you," he said, "The more I knew. I don't know when I put it into words."

"Nobody ever understood before. Henry, they want to come inside and kill you so we can grow young and start again."

"Why do you have to kill me?"

"Getting rid of you starts up the spell."

Henry's arms were around her. His hands, clasping below her breasts, had little brown dots on their backs, and the skin was loose and the veins were puffy, but they were the hands of the boy of long ago.

"You and I," she said firmly, "have got to stay inside this house forever. They can't touch us here."

"You mean stay here, for years, inside this room?"

"Yes," said Serena. "They won't give up."

"But I will," said Henry. "I'd rather be dead. It would be the same thing. Can you imagine how we'd feel about each other after five years? After one?"

"I never thought about that."

"Think about it now."

Serena tugged at her messy thoughts until she found one that night do. "Henry, would you like to come along?" she asked. She went over to the window and called, "Hetty, Ida, can I bring Henry?" Hetty and Ida laughed and Serena was not sure what she was asking any more. "Can I?"

"Can you what?" asked Hetty.

"Can you what?" asked Ida.

She didn't know.

"Can she bring me," said Henry.

"No!" said Hetty. "No one ever has done anything like that."

"Oh, let them try," said Ida. Then she laughed. That made Hetty laugh and their laughing made Serena laugh and then the wind rose higher, laughing too.

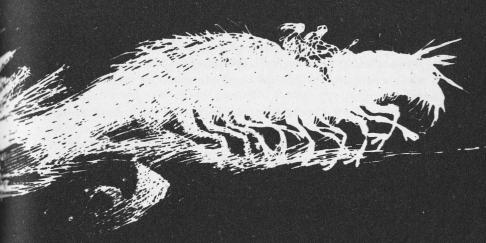
But Henry did not laugh. He took Serena's hand and they went to the door and opened it. They held their arms around each other as the whirlwind caught them and lifted them.

Winds pushed between them, clawed their shoulders, unclasped Serena's arms and held them while she lost the memory of wanting to cling.

(Please turn to page 73)



Complete Novel



ANDRE NORTON

LIVE LORD KOR!

With the help of fire worms and a lovely sorceress, the adventurer from Earth battles to save a far, far world... When in 3450 (old Terran reckoning) El Zim made the momentous breakthrough that allowed time travel, the long-discussed threat of fatal meddling in the past became real. Strong measures were quickly taken to insure no indiscriminate exploration, though Zim and his assistants had already promised great caution.

By 3465 the controls had hardened into a bureaucratic system of monitorial services with trained and screened operatives. Medding was allowed, even authorized, if done "by the book" and not on planets included in the home systems of the existing in-power groups.

For example, on some planets discovered by the ever-widening space search of Survey history had taken grim turns. Such worlds were declared open "for the good of all" to the newly organized Bureau of Time Exploration and Manipulation.

Several dazzling successes in bringing, as it were, the dead back to life were enough to entrench the Bureau. And the benefits, so widely advertised, could not be denied by even the most cautious and conservative. Of course, there were failures, too. But most of those were mentioned only in obscure reports carefully swallowed by the headquarters computer under a do-not-divulge code.

By 3500 the whole operation had been refined sufficiently to run more or less smoothly under data supplied by ZAT, a master computer whose limitations had yet to be discovered. But men are not machines. Occasionally crises arose. The answer was a second elite corps trained to snatch victory from defeat if such were possible.

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CREED TRAPNELL snorted, "What's the alibi this time—computer error? Of course, anyone with a grain of imagination might think that's been a little bit overworked. Let's see—that leaves that other bit of blame-shuffling, the one about insufficient native data obtained by survey crew."

Controller Goddard, Field Force Five, had never been known to display emotion. There was a legend sometimes accepted by cadets as truth, that he was only a humanoid body housing an extension of ZAT's computer brain. Now he did not raise his eyes from the TV screen implanted in his desk.

Goddard had no easirests in his office. He carefully cultivated the art of making visitors uncomfortable so that they would not linger and use up his valuable time. But Trapnell sprawled as much as his stiff chair allowed, his booted feet leaving faint smudges on the neutral green of the carpet.

Creed Trapnell was far from being in uniform. The boots were scuffed, the breeches above them bagged and stained. His shirt, tucked into a wide belt studded with metal bosses, had once had sleeves as a ragged fringe about the arm-holes testified. Now his deeply tanned arms were bare. He looked the ragged wanderer, which gave him pleasure. He had no reason to want to please Goddard.

"Insufficient native data," he repeated lazily. "That must be it. They haven't used it for—" He held out his hands, reckoning time by turning down fingers, "For at least four calls now. And," he added, "I am on certified leave." Such a reminder might do him no good but at least it would register on the tape Goddard kept running.

Goddard looked up, eyes blank. When he spoke his voice held enough metallic twang to carry out the robot illusion.

"The excuse is falsified work reports."

Trapnell sat up as if jerked.

"I don't believe it!" He slapped his knee and dust flew from the breeches. "It isn't possible they would ever admit that."

"They had no choice." Had there, or had there not been a flicker of feeling in Goddard's eyes? This he should relish that the arrogant Fore Office, which always expected Goddard's men to pick up the pieces without open recognition of their services and only grudging acceptance of their existence, had to admit an error of its own.

Trapnell was excited, a little. This was more than he had expected when Goddard had recalled him from a well-earned leave. It must be N hot, if the front office admitted a mistake.

Goddard flashed on the wall screen and said twangily, "Vallek." The word meant nothing to Trapnell, but the screen filled with a picture. They could be looking out of a window at a brilliantly hued landscape. In the foreground stretched a city: walled, towered, enveloped by fields of vegetation not a true green, having a golden

sheen. And the architecture of the city was alien.

Swiftly Trapnell's trained mind evaluated and filed the scene.

Then the city disappeared into a new panorama. Desert country. The sky was a golden sheet deepening into orange, the ground underneath was umber. No vegetation at all—yet the soil was broken here and there by ridges of rock, buttes. And against the horizon loomed a chain of mountains.

Now the desert picture gave way to a close-up of one of the mountains. One slope was broken by a clift carved and embellished, the patterns inlaid with metal and gems so that it glittered under the yellow sky.

"Orm Temple," Goddard identified.

There were other scenes, some within that clift where rock-walled ways bore murals. As they scanned this spot or that, Goddard supplied brief explanation.

Finally the Controller snapped off the viewer. "The position is this. Vallek lies today in Point Six Sector—but it is a radioactive cinder."

"N War? I don't get it. That view was of a feudal level civilization."

"You saw a time of split," Goddard returned. "From there the future is in doubt. Shortly thereafter a Holy War was proclaimed by the priests of the Worm—their oracle made a prophecy which helped defeat the Kor-King of the city—Lanascol. Then their theocracy fell apart ten years later, making way for a conqueror from the south. He established a line, which some two hundred years later, developed a technology that within five hundred years more blew Vallek into a cinder. The priests of the worm must not start that war—if we can help it."

"How do we work—through the oracle?"

"Just so. You'll have briefing—but the situation is this—their oracle is always an imbecile. And he never lives very long. When he dies the priests set out on a quest which reaches out all over Vallek. They must find an idiot baby, male, born at the very moment of the previous oracle's passing. The child is always completely empty-minded."

"Then he must mouth what some priest tells him—"

"You would think so," Goddard agreed. "Only, as far as the spy

rays have discovered, that isn't true. When they want a prophecy he is taken to a seat overlooking a so-called 'worm walk' and left there for the night. When they bring him out he repeats, in perfectly intelligible language—though normally he only mouths sounds—an answer. The entrance to the Walk is guarded closely. So far we cannot detect any manner of fraud. But Zat says it is more than meddling by some priest. And this time he must not give any war prophecy."

"How can you be so sure that your southern conqueror won't eventually take over anyway?"

"ZAT says no. If Lanascol continues to exist as a strong power the development of a higher civilization will follow another road altogether. Now—you perceive the advantage of the idiot oracle?"

"You mean—he is the one to be occupied? Sounds simple enough. What went wrong?"

"That is what you must find out. ZAT says wrong data was fed in and our man never arrived."

"But—" Trapnell was startled.

"Yes—but! This was not discovered until the official weekly summary was supplied by ZAT. There was an alarm—we found the falsified tapes."

"It should be easy to discover who had access—"

"The falsification was done in the spy records—on the other side. So ZAT reports."

"Wow! We have a resident agent there?"

"Naturally. Zat gives clearance in that direction. It's plain someone else meddled."

"But that's impossible!" Trapnell felt as if the green carpet under his dusty boots had opened a mouth. Facts he had accepted as solid all his life . . .

"We have pushed ZAT for an answer. The reply was insufficient data. But no denial. So we are faced with two possibilities. One, we have a traitor in our service. Two, we are not the only ones operating along this line. After all the galaxy is too large for any one empire, confederation or species to know. There may well be another Service in business. That we have not come across it before is a perfectly reasonable chance."

"But why a falsified report?"

"One can think of several reasons. We may be under observation. We wish to save Vallek—the others might not want that. Or they may be throwing up an obstacle to test us."

"A nice dish you've put on my table," Trapnell commented sourly. "So I play the oracle and, at the same time, try to discover who doesn't want me there. By the way, does the front office have any trace of what happened to their man?"

"Not as yet. The resident agent has been alerted. Look, this is a rush job. They are waiting for you in briefing. You've only a few planet days before you're supposed to prophesy. And this must go through—it's AA priority."

Trapnell stood up. "Aren't they always when we get them?"

"We don't get them until they hit the hot line. Remember, this time the job's double."

"As if I can forget," Trapnell said as he went out.

Lying in the send-sling, a briefing helm clamped on his head, watching the techs make ready, Trapnell wondered why he stayed in the Service. He was tired. Gone was the bounce he had once known. He had lived how many other lives? He couldn't even reckon them. And most had been dangerous ones. Twice he had even been killed and the techs had had to pull him back in a hurry to save him in time. To say nothing of the occasions he had lived through torture, maiming and other ills in his borrowed bodies. There was always the one fact, too, he could be planted only in a mindless, near-zero-idiot body, which meant complications from the start. That was why the resident agents went through in another technique to receive and sustain the action man. They never had any hope of return. At least he did not have to face permanent exile in that manner.

He suffered through that last moment of rebellion, as usual—the desire to throw off the helm and shout out a refusal to go. Then the tech threw the switch.

WAKENING from the send was always to be dreaded. There was a period of disorientation miserable for the victim. And Trapnell always hated to open his eyes to the new surroundings, to inspect his new body. But delay offered nothing and he nerved himself to open his eyes.

He stared straight up into the folds of a tent or canopy. It was not of the vivid colors he associated with this world but of a pearl shade with a shimmering rainbow overcast. Turning his head gave him sight of a window with the yellow sky beyond. Over that opening stretched a finely barred netting. And on either side hung drapes of the same pearl luster as the canopy.

His hands slid over a silky surface. It was apparent he lay in a richly provided bed. Now he dared to brace himself up on his elbows. He saw that set in the footposts of the bed were rings of metal from which ran chains disappearing under the coverings. He threw those aside. His ankles were fitted with silver bands to which the chains were fastened. A prisoner!

Perhaps this oracle was not so much of an idiot as to lead a vegetable existence. Perhaps this oracle, rather, was mobile, apt to wander off if not restrained. The grill at the window could be a further barrier. He had a role to play which would automatically be triggered as soon as he sighted his keepers. The briefing would have seen to that.

Now he tried to judge the length of the chains and when he moved they clashed with a faintly musical ring. For the first time he examined his body. Somehow he had thought to find it small and puny or else of a bloated, unhealthy aspect. But his legs, the rest of him, were lean, well muscled, the skin a tan-red in color. There was a puckered scar down the outside of one thigh, long healed yet still the reminder of a wound.

He ran his fingertips over his face, found a second scar-pucker above his left eye and running up into the line of his hair. And that was tender. Odd—if he were the idiot oracle kept by the priests since childhood, how had his body, in such fit condition, acquired those scars?

His movements again set the chains to ringing. A man came around the canopy curtains. He was not wearing the red robes the briefing had said were a priest's. Nor did the sight of him trigger the response Trapnell expected.

Though it was hard to judge age in another race, the newcomer might be on the verge of middle years. He wore high boots, above them skin-tight leggings, and a high-collared, long-sleeved, wideskirted tunic without visible fastenings. That was of a dull blue shade and on the breast was embroidered an elaborate symbol in silver, parts of the design glinting with tiny gems.

He had a belt of silver links which supported the holster of a rodlike weapon. And he gave the appearance of a competent fighting man. His skin was red-brown, his hair seemingly black until he walked into the full window light to prove it a dark red.

Staring at the newcomer, Trapnell was disturbed by his lack of other reaction. This was the first time a send-briefing had ever failed to fit him at once into his assumed role. He simply had no background to fit here. Unless this were another case of a send gone wrong and he was in a place not meant . . . He would have to be careful until either his briefing knowledge would be triggered to life or he could discover what had happened.

The man voiced an exclamation as he studied Trapnell.

"My Lord Kor!" His voice was sharp. excited. "Your mind—it is back from the dark!"

My Lord Kor—the Kor-King? But that was in Lanascol, not in Orm Temple! It was clear he was neither where he was supposed to be nor whom. He put his hand to his head without realizing he made that gesture.

"Your wound, Lord Kor—does it still pain you? It was indeed a grievous slash, dealing a hard blow—"

A head wound. And an exchange of bodies could never be made with a sentient subject. So had he arrived in a body where a head wound had made the victim an imbecile? If so—well, he perhaps had a chance. Certainly it was a logical explanation, though if he had not reached the oracle—why?

"It pains—a little—" he mumbled. "I—I cannot remember—" Give them that explanation and use it for the only cloak he had.

"It like to split your skull, Lord Kor," the other man assured him. "You have wandered in the dark for many days, not knowing the Kor-King, your father, nor the Lady Yarakoma, those nearest to you. Food had to be put in your mouth, and you tended like a babe of tender years. And then—when the ravings came upon you—" He shook his head. "You would have harmed yourself had we not—"

"Had we not what, Girant?" A second man moved out to stand beside the first. He bore no symbol on the front of his green tunic. And he had a sleeveless cloak, his arms thrust through the open slits. The garment was of white with strange red symbols bordering its hem.

For the first time Trapnell's briefing worked. The newcomer was a medico, or the closest to one of that training Vallek knew. The man shouldered Girant aside, proceeded to grip Trapnell's wrist, peer searchingly into his eyes.

"Well enough," he said after a long moment. Then he felt gently along the seal of the healing scar.

"Better than we hoped, Lord Kor," was his brisk opinion. "Tell me—what do you remember?"

Trapnell shook his head. "Nothing—I do not even know your name—or his." He pointed to the man in blue.

The latter started to talk but the medico waved his hand for quiet.

"Some difficulty is to be expected. Praise be that you have at least come to your senses. For the rest, it may be that your memory shall return, if raggedly. And there are enough here to tell you of the past—some who will enjoy it." He looked sober, as if he had some subtle meaning for that last remark.

"You are," he pointed to Trapnell, "the Lord Kor Kenric, second son to Kor-King Hernaut. Until three months ago you were Warden of the South, in command of the Border Guard. There was an attack by the Kawyn, after which you were found nigh to dead. Girant here managed to keep you breathing until he could get you back to Lanascol. You had a hole in your skull wide enough for your brains to leak through, and for a goodly while your actions have been such that we thought they had."

His words held little deference. If the Lord Kor was his superior in rank, this medico was no subservient courtier. And Trapnell-Kenric, he must begin to think of himself as Kenric—found the fellow's bruskness bracing.

"And you are?"

"Atticus, Body Healer. You'll see much of me—as you have not before, having had a body which served you well, Lord Kor." He turned to Girant. "Best inform the Kor-King of this recovery."

"Of course." The other hurried away. Atticus seemed to be listening until there came the sound of a closing door. Then he looked to his patient once again.

"It is perhaps not meet to trouble a man with a broken head over possible danger," he said quickly. "But it is well you be warned. There are those who will take it ill that you have your wits clear again."

Now what have I gotten into, thought Trapnell. It sounded like a tangle here also. But any help he could get from Atticus he needed.

"Those being?" he prompted.

"Namely the Lady Yarakoma." Atticus paused, watching closely. Seeing no sign that his patient recognized the name, he frowned. "If you cannot remember her, you are indeed set adrift, Lord Kor."

"But I cannot. So tell me."

"She is bedfellow-in-chief to your brother Folkward, eldest son to your father. She desired to follow the old custom to secure the lineage by entering your bed also, but you would have none of her. Thus she fears lest you take a concubine and so imperil the heritage of her lord. Were you lack-witted, she need no longer hold that fear. And there are those who would stand high if she were the sole mate to the princes. So she is chief within these walls to wish you ill—"

"And outside the walls?"

The medico shrugged. "As Border Warden, one who has turned his face against any alliance with Kawyn, you have many who wish you anything but the blessing of health."

"So there are troubles to conquer," Trapnell said.

"That is so, Lord Kor. We live in troubled times. Though it is also true that all times are troubled for some who live through them. Kawyn moves in the south, her eyes ever upon Lanascol which she wishes to sweep from her path. And they say that the worm priests blat much of some dire prophecy. They expect it from that drooling voice they cherish to pronounce weighty dooms on men and nations."

Trapnell seized on that. "A new prophecy? When do they say it will be delivered?"

"Within five days. They have sent a messenger to the Kor-King, bidding him come to listen. Though he is in two minds about answering their invitation. Invitation—I would say their order. They grow more and more puffed up with their own importance since

the Rovers of Dupt have winged in to pay them homage and tribute. Though were I a worm priest I would look well at any largesse offered by a Rover lest blood drip from it to stain my hands. Also I would ask myself why such would suddenly want to make one with the Worms. The Rovers have no piety in their crooked bodies. Just another worry for the Kor-King.

Trapnell nodded, not knowing what else to do.

"It is well, Lord Kor," said the medico, "that the son upon whom he can depend the most is able once more to stand at his back. You could not have regained your senses more opportunely. The Kor-King must not be allowed to enter the worm burrows.

"You are very plain of speech, Atticus."

The medico smiled grimly. "Be you glad I am, Lord Kor. I have proved my right to plain speaking, and I shall continue to exercise it."

The sound of a door, then, and Girant stepped into sight. "The Kor-King," he announced. "And the Lady Yarakoma."

II

THE night was lighted by three moons. Lord Kor Kenric gripped the balcony rail and stared down into the city. At least this much he had retained of his failed briefing: in that maze was help. The permanent agent had her squarters there. The problem was to reach him. Being the Lord Kor, newly recovered from a hurt all had believed unhealable, Trapnell did not believe he would be suffered to go about alone.

He feared such as Atticus would be on watch—for Lord Kor's good. Yet he could not waste time. He knew that within five days the oracle would signal the uprising that would finish all lying below him now.

So he had to make a move now, tonight. And he was ignorant of the passages of this keep. It would be only too easy to lose his way and alert some guard. Which meant that for egress he had to use the outside of the building rather than the inside, and now he was studying that way.

The balcony on which he stood was one of three on the same level. The one to his left overhung an arch two stories high, one

story carved deeply and offering hand-holes.

He had already plundered the Lord Kor's wardrobe, donning the most inconspicuous garments he had found there. The boots he carried slung on a cord around his neck.

The tricky bit was reaching the next balcony. Setting his teeth hard upon his lower lip, he took the leap, his hands reaching for the other rail. He caught it, scrambled to firm footing. Not only his past training served him now, but the fact that he wore the body of a man who had kept in good condition.

The rest was easy. The carvings on the arch served excellently as a ladder. Once on the cobbled pavement he looked up and back. There was a dim glow in the third balconied window, but his own and that immmediately above the arch were dark.

He did not have to fear sentries here. He vaulted over a bolted ceremony gate protected by solemn curses, not men. And he slipped along a blind-walled road—since it was *lese majeste'* to have a window looking out upon that way.

Reaching a main avenue, Trapnell—now thinking completely of himself as Kenric, calling himself Kenric—suited his pace to those around him. Again local custom favored him in the hooded cloaks of night wear. His impatience was good enough to have sent him running had he not held tight rein upon it. So little time! He must discover what had gone wrong. And there was a thin chance that if he could reach the oracle, he might complete the sending after all. There had been one or two cases in the past when the subject to be possessed had been in such circumstances that an intermediary had had to be used to reach him. Of course, on those occasions the action had been programed by ZAT. He put aside speculation and hurried toward his immediate goal.

At this hour there were few abroad. Twice he dodged into dark doorways and stood waiting for the night watch to pass. Then he reached a side alley and a part of his briefing went into action. Two doors down—under a shadowed overhang.

He reached the place quickly, ran fingertips over the surface. There were no street torches near and he was in the dark. His fore-finger found a promising groove, followed it to a stud that he pressed three times. Then his head jerked around. That faint sound! He flattened himself against the door.

Someone was coming down the lane as noiselessly as possible. Another agent? Someone hunting him?

As if he saw her now standing in a small slash of moonlight across the alley, Kernic suddenly recalled the woman who had come with the Kor-King to his chamber earlier. She had been soft of voice, perilously sweet of countenance—and as deadly as a falcon in swoop. He had known her type on many worlds. The women who used their bodies as weapons. Atticus had been right—the Lady Yarakoma was to be feared. Yet she had played her part well, probably hoping to win the newly recovered and memory-less Lord Kor to her wishes. If she had set a watch on him—and that could well be . . .

His hand was on the rod in his belt holster. He did not know the nature of that weapon yet, but he did know the button that released whatever form of attack it delivered.

The faint sound which had alerted him was not repeated. He could see nothing other than a few more arched doors along the lane. The signal—why had no one answered? He felt behind him with his left hand, his right now holding the weapon. Perhaps he must press again—

The door at that instant opened soundlessly.

"Seven-nine-two."

"Eight-ten-three," came at him out of the darkness. Fingers closed about his wrist and he was drawn in. The door closed.

The hand on him tugged and he followed, not yet holstering his weapon. He felt fabric flap about. Soon they were in a dim light and he saw a small room. Its walls were hung with lengths of cloth masking any entrance, cloth night-black in color but worked with silver runes. The light came from a ball mounted on a stand in the exact center of the chamber. Two stools of a black wood faced each other across the light.

All this matched his briefing, and he instantly recognized the woman who had led him here. She was tall and rather spare, young, her face oval with well-marked features. Her skin was the redbrown of Lanascol's people, just as her hair, which she wore loose, was of a darker red.

Her robe of black bore the same silver stitching of occult designs as did the curtains. Her hands were covered by black gloves, to the fingertips of which were sewn talonlike silver nails.

He spoke first. "Niccolae."

"True." Her voice was a quiet contralto. "But who are you, wearing the guise of Lord Kor Kenric? Were you not one I should harbor you could not have passed the door warn. But of your coming I have not been advised."

He unbuckled the throat latch of his cloak.

"Something happened. I was sent to replace the oracle at Orm Temple. I awoke in this body instead."

Her eyes were long, slanting upward a little toward her temples. She studied him.

"I must believe you, since there is that here which checks your story and it has not denied you. But never before has a sending ended so."

"There was another agent—from the First Service. We have had no further word from him."

"True. Nor can I tell you aught either. I could not trace him within the temple. It is closed to all women and the priests have safeguards more formidable than this primitive world suggests. I must work in devious ways—mainly through that—" She gestured at the globe. "I have learned only this much. There are many strangers gathering at the temple now. Even the Rovers of Dupt. He whom I contacted by mind-see—though he thought he dreamed only—no longer answers. The wife of the steward for Orm Temple here in Lanascol comes to me for foreseeing. She is a good subject for sleep search but knows little. I know, however, that the priests have friends at court ready for an overturn in rule. Their first target is the man whose body you wear, their second is the Kor-King himself. I have sifted rumor and used sleep search where I could. And I believe that Lord Kor Kenric was not the victim of any Kawyn sword but of a traitor stroke."

"I have been warned by the medico Atticus of the Lady Yarakoma. But this tangle of intrigue has nothing to do with my reaching the oracle—"

She had moved to rest her strangely gloved hands on the globe, half veiling it. "You think that if you face him you may transfer?"

"Such has been known to happen. But I have an idea that if I go openly to Orm Temple, I'll have little chance of seeing the oracle—

though they have sent for the Kor-King. If I am too late, c. will no longer be of use."

She nodded. "And Orm Temple has its safeguards. Your task will be hard."

"There are only a few days left, Niccolae."

"We—"

What she would say Kenric was never to hear. He reeled back, clutching at the wall hangings for support. The material tore loose and he fell. And he saw her also crumple where she stood. His last meaningful thought was that they had been attacked by some mind thrust, and then the darkness closed in.

CONSCIOUSNESS returned slowly. It was like being shaken out of a deep sleep and required to solve, while still dazed, an obtuse problem. Stirring deep within him was an alarm. He felt pain then, his bruised body shifting back and forth on an unsteady surface which rose and fell. While in his ears there was a creaking.

When he tried to move, he discovered his wrists were bound together, as were his ankles, the two bonds linked by yet another cord to fetter him securely. There was a bag over his head acting as both blindfold and gag.

Kenric forced himself to think back. He had been with the agent Niccolae—then they had both been struck down. Almost as if a stunner turned on mind beam had...A stunner! But such a weapon was unknown here, existing far ahead in the future.

A personality could be sent back; the Service had been doing that for many years now. But such a transfer was an intricate operation. Spy rays were relatively simple compared to it. And to send weapons—impossible! Unless Goddard's suggestion of some parallel force of men could be true . . . a competing Service.

But if such were able to transport arms they must be far in advance of ZAT. Kenric chewed on that and found the thought more than a little daunting.

Niccolae had mentioned an in-gathering of strangers at Orm Temple. Among them were there other time and space travelers? Perhaps they had in some manner detected Kenric's arrival. It was never wise to underrate the enemy. Was Yarakoma a part of some intrigue they fostered? She could even be a plant for them, as Niccolae was for the Service. The possibilities were endless and unpleasant.

But speculation was of no help now. He struggled, trying to guage the efficiency of his ties. They were tight and strong. No trick he remembered could free him.

The bag over his head was to a degree translucent. By the light filtering through he judged this to be day. He felt, too, that they were in the open. He was hot, as if he lay under the full rays of a sun. He longed for water.

Now the surface under him tilted. He slid forward, winding up against a hard wall. He could hear muffled cries. From the jolting that followed he gathered the vehicle carrying him was out of control.

His struggles suddenly brought him against something softer than the bruising surfaces, something that wriggled frantically as if trying to escape the weight of his body. Then, with a crash which slammed them together, the carrier came to an abrupt halt.

A low moan sounded close to his ear. There was a feeble pushing against him. Niccolae? He tried to roll away and did lift some of his weight from that close contact. Then a punishing grip closed on his shoulders. He was jerked across an uneven surface that left splinters in his hands, then thrown to the ground. Only the bag saved his face from grinding into rough gravel. And the fall knocked the breath out of him.

He lay gasping until hands hooked in his armpits, drew him along on his back bumping over rocks, and slammed him finally against a stone that supported him in a half-sitting position, his legs drawn into a cramping curve by the bonds. The stone behind him was hot. Fingers fumbled about his throat and in a moment the bag was off, he near blinded by sun glare.

Squinting as his sight adjusted, he observed three men in rough clothing. And this must be the desert with its rusty sands. Though there was the shimmer of heat resembling those Goddard had shown him on the viewing screen.

One of the three put fingers to his lips and whistled shrilly. He was answered in a like manner from not too far away. In the meantime Kenric worked his head around to see Niccolae's black robe, now creased and torn, making a dark blot at a neighboring rock. She

rested also in a cramped position, her head fallen forward so her hair screened her face. He could not tell whether she were conscious or not.

"We have delivered—" So the whistler spoke.

He stood with his hand out in demand, but there was an air of uneasiness about him. His two companions closed in as if all three were ready to take to their heels as soon as their transaction were completed.

"We have delivered," the man repeated. "Now you pay!" Even if he were uneasy, he appeared determined to get his full due. A rock stood as a screen so that Kenric could not see whom he addressed

Then a purse was tossed and a man grabbed it, weighed it for a moment in his hand as if he could reckon its contents by heft alone. He stowed it in his tunic, turned on his 'heel and departed, his followers with him. But he who had paid made no move into the captives' sight.

Kenric half closed his eyes against the sun. Lying here was like being trussed in an oven. He wondered if this were the end, to be left tied in this sere wilderness.

Then—he was touched. He nearly cried out, for being what it was, that touch surely shocked him. Someone was using a mind probe! As that weapon which had led to their capture, such was totally foreign. This was not esper probing, he knew. No, this had a mechanical origin. And alien—so alien that it nicked his own mental band only at intervals like a kind of remote pecking.

He was mind-shielded, of course. No agent was sent without that protection. And Niccolae must be also. Any invasion of their thoughts could read only their assumed identities. But this probe worked so unevenly, surely it was not working at all. And whoever used it apparently could not adjust to the proper band.

Though he continued to try. Kenric could imagine the unseen wrestling with exasperation to center his probe. Then at last the pecking stopped. Confrontation should follow. Kenric tensed, waiting for the appearance of whoever had paid off the kidnappers. But the stifling hot minutes dragged by and nothing showed. Nor could he hear the least sound.

Niccolae stirred, and he could see a thin cheek.

"He is gone." Her words were hoarse, as if her mouth were dry and had difficulty uttering them.

She seemed so sure, Kenrie relaxed a little. But if they had been deserted in this condition . . .

"Yes." She might be reading his mind as the probe had tried to do. "They could well have left us. If so, we shall be dead before night—the sun slavs speedily here."

"How-" he began.

"Wait! There may be an auswer-yonder-" She pointed with her chin.

Closer to him than to her was a break in the ground, the shadow of a standing rock giving it shade. It was a circular opening about the size of his thumb, and around it mounded loose bits of gravel and sand. As he looked a reddish ball appeared from the hole. It was the head of a segmented creature that now crawled out, arose on jointed, plated legs. The head had three eyes set well to the fore, and not far below those a fringe of tentacles straggled, not unlike a stiff beard. Down its back extended a rough growth of black hairlike fibers.

"Fire worm," Niccolae identified. Her voice came weaker, more slowly. "It craves salt above all else. Look to your bonds."

His bonds? Kenric looked down. Those ties were of fabric. And they were wet with his sweat. Sweat. Salt . . .

Fire worms had not been included in his briefing. But Niccolae seemed to know. He pushed then with his feet and, wriggling away from his support, thudded to the ground. He wriggled his way to the holes down which the fire worm had whipped at his first movement.

Finally he could move no more, his one cheek rasping against gravel, the sun strong enough to fry him. He fought against panic, hoping against hope that Niccolae's suggestion would work.

Ш

THOUGH his hands were numb a prick of pain hit. And he guessed a fire worm was finding salt on more than his bonds. He steeled himself not to jerk away. The pain grew worse, and his imagination pictured a feeding on his tormented flesh.

It was hard to lie still, the more so when he was not sure but that he was providing a useless feast. But he endured, and the end came as a sharper pain did make him jerk. His hands fell apart. The strain on the cord between them and his ankles was gone. He could straighten out.

He rolled out of the shadow of the rock, scrabbling in the gravel with his numb and bleeding hands to pull himself away. Somehow he reached one of the taller boulders, rested against it.

There was a milling around the fire-worm hole he had left. Several of the creatures scuttled back and forth, their heads erect as if they sought by sight or scent their vanished prey.

Kenric tore at his ankle ties. Now for the first time he could see Niccolae clearly. She had slumped so that only the rock at her back kept her from the ground. He crawled to her side, pulled her around to get at the strips which held her. She did not stir as he worked.

Somehow he loosed her, steadied her body against his shoulder while he swept back her hair. Her eyes were closed, her cracked lips open. Shallow breath whistled between them.

"Niccolae!" He shook her gently. He patted her cheek, his gnawed hand leaving a smear of blood.

She gasped. Her eyes came half-open. Encouraged, he began to pull her with him back into what poor shade the standing stones offered, away from the fire-worm nest from which more and more inhabitants were issuing. No longer aids, they were now a menace.

"What-!" The girl in his arms turned her head.

"It's all right. We are free."

She opened her eyes fully with a visible effort, raised her arms to look at her puffed and swollen hands.

"Did the fire worms—?"

"Yes. But they liked the taste they had too well. They want more."

"We—" Her voice was the faintest of whispers as she ran her tongue over seared lips. "We had better move—"

He put out new effort, managed to attain his feet. The stones around him stood like tree boles in a wood, but the leaves and branches which would have been sun shelter were missing. He could not see far in any direction. He began to fear that although they were no longer captives they might still die in this furnace.

Niccolae struggled to pull herself up. He stooped to help her. She leaned against him, lifted her hands clumsily to sweep back her hair.

"Come on!" His arm supporting her, they sidled around one of the stones and then the next.

Suddenly she cried out, pointing with a puffed finger.

He had not thought the stones around them were any more than a freak of nature. But here was a find that argued differently. Protruding from the hard, sun-cracked soil was an unmistakable arch, though its supporting pillars were so buried that the shadowed space it enclosed was no higher than what they could crawl into. Yet even that was a promise for survival. Kenric lurched toward it, bearing the girl with him.

At the edge of that much eroded stone he went to his knees, carrying her along. Together they crept into the hollow. If they might so last out the day, they would have a chance after the coming of night.

He crawled in blindly, for the transition from the glare to this dark was more than his eyes could immediately adjust to. But without warning the surface under them gave way. They slid down, engulfed in clay dust, gravel, debris enough to set them coughing and choking, until they lay half buried in the stuff.

"Niccolae?" Kenric felt about, trying to find her. Then his fingers tangled in the mass of her hair. "Niccolae!" he cried again, only to hear his rumble of voice answered by a rattle as more of the loose stuff slid down. He set about frantically to dig out, afraid a second slide might completely bury them.

Having broken free, he used the hair as a guide to uncover the girl. His questing hand found a reassuring heartbeat. He pulled her well away from the debris before he set out to explore the pit into which they had fallen.

Only it was not a pit. The opening above gave some light and by that and his sweeping hands he discovered they had landed in a passage. The arch must have been a doorway, plugged with earth and stone at some remote date.

At least it was much cooler here. He remembered that natural

caves lowered in temperature as one drew farther from their entrances. Perhaps a similar principle operated here. His next discovery was more serious. For when he tried to reclimb the slope, it continued to give way under him. The whole surface was so fluid that the least touch sent it slipping.

"Where—?" Her whisper heartened him and he closed his arms about her in thankful relief.

"We've fallen into a passage of some kind."

"Dark—cool—" she said wonderingly. "But how do we get out?"

"We can't climb back," he told her frankly. "We can only go the other way."

But would air last? And the dark—dared they face that?

He could feel her moving against him. Suddenly there was a subdued glow coming from a small sphere she held, and she gave a small and shaky laugh.

"As a sorceress, consulted by the good people of Lanascol—" her voice was stronger and steadier— "I have my own tricks, friend. What served me in mind-sleep, can do even more good here. Now let us see truly where we stand."

Though the light from the sphere was limited, there seemed to be an answer to it—coming from points on the walls. Kenric heard her exclaim, and she lurched forward, he quickly supporting her, to one of those gleaming patches. She advanced her sphere closer to it.

As the lights drew together, so did both grow sharper and brighter.

She answered his questioning glance. "Like works upon like. This sphere, one of the secrets of those who follow my calling, is radiant at my touch. But it would seem that those who fashioned this place had unlimited supplies of orm ore to place in their walls. I do not believe we shall have to fear the dark much."

They advanced at a pace suiting their battered bodies. Those patches on the walls did ignite, letting them see more.

While at first the studding of orm ore followed no pattern, that altered as the corridor continued, sloping a little down. Now there were carvings, and the patches of radiance formed eyes, coated fangs, swords and spears of warriors struggling in titantic battle. Here were shown fire worms, too, but these were no two-inch

wrigglers. Rather the lost artist had pictured them as formidable monsters, on the hairy backs of which rode men—or humanoid creatures resembling men. And this weird cavalry fought not only other men, but was harrassed by large flying reptiles.

Niccolae pointed to one such leather-winged, snake-necked thing.

"A Dupt fanger! Those might be the Rovers of Dupt! They live and ride today—"

"And these fire worms—look at their size. Did they, or a species like them, ever exist to your knowledge?"

"No. But as I have said, the Orm priests guard secrets. They take their oracle down into what they call the worm ways—so it might be that once the fire worms did have larger kin. This place must be very old. And if the Dupt fangers are still known in our day—"

"Perhaps the monster fire worms exist also? Let us trust not here..."

The air had continued breathable—to his surprise—but he thought it must have been ages since anyone had come this way. The battle scenes continued to cover the walls until they became monotonous viewing. The slight coolness gradually became a definite chill.

How far they had come, there was no way of telling. Their best pace was slow and they had to stop and rest now and then to favor their aching bodies. And their torment of thirst grew ever stronger.

It was during one of the rest pauses that Kenric made his first hopeful finding. He had put his hand to the wall; now he snatched it back. In one of the hollows of a fire worm's leg his fingers had found damp. Swiftly he ran his hands over that pitted mass of carving, calling to Niccolae to hold the light closer.

So they discovered moisture, enough to be licked from the gritty stone. Then Kenric hurried them ahead; perhaps the deeper they went the more chance there was for water. They came to a stairs dropping into a dark well unlit by any orm ore.

That descent seemed endless. But they hurried, for the air was dank. When they did reach the end of the stairway the sphere awoke a glitter from the surface of a pool.

This was no freak of nature but a round artificial basin holding
(Please turn to page 148)

Hetty and Ida circled past them in the wind, dropping bits of clothing, bits of years.

What, thought Serena, was this lumpy thing that clutched her round the waist? Whose were these ugly arms that kept her from catching up with Ida? Serena tried to squirm free. She did not want this piece of the life she was finished with. Did not want this dingy remnant of good but used days. Everything was going to be fresh and new and clean and clear.

She kicked.

The arms were slipping, weakening.

Good.

Hetty, with long black lovely hair, whirled close.

"You see?" she shouted.

"Hurry, kick him off," called Ida, soaring.

Henry's head rolled back. Serena touched his face to push him off. She met his gentle, hazel eyes. He understood.

And so she clutched him. She held him by the arm, the waist. Even in the center of the wind when she forgot why, she remembered to hold, though her arms burned and she had no breath.

And then in the very very point of center there was nothing and they came to quiet.

THEY were lying on the beach, the sisters three, each with young ivory skin, lively black hair, velvety brown eyes deliciously slanted.

Serena's fingers, long and thin on golden hands, were made for gesturing from slender wrists. They were entangled in some rags. Wrapped together, interlaced, in some kind of grayish, rotting wool.

She let the bundle go and wiped her fingers. Then she looked at a man-shaped heap of something lying next to her on the beach.

She pushed it over. Inside the tatters was a wizened face, an aged face. Mouth and eyes tight shut. The cracked, dried lips felt the sun and smiled in gap-toothed, senile joy. The puffy eyes blinked open. They were hazel eyes, gentle eyes.

Henry's eyes.

Unmistakably Henry's eyes.

Unmistakably, unmistakably Henry.

CALL ME MILLION

In his way, Charlie DiSalle was a sort of universal man

FREDERIK POHL

To look at Charlie DiSalle, who is I, you would think him not much. For instance, the you who was BeauLee Cartworth thought he was a snoring drunk. The you who were Mr. and Mrs. Ripton R. Gilvey saw him vomiting and wheezing over the wall around Hyde Park. "He's an American," said the male of you charitably. The female said, "He's the kind of American we left Titusville to avoid. Let's go." But you didn't go far, did you? Not that you were so very much yourselves, Mr. and Mrs. G. You were a snack to be consumed and forgotten, Diet-Rite people, not much nourishment in you.

But Charlie DiSalle is not unfair. He admits he wasn't much to look at, even then. Now he's worse. He's fat and fifty. The backs of his hands are covered with little brown blots. His face looks as though he had just awakened. He would dress nicely if he could, but he forgets.

He is not reasonably to be blamed for any of this, because he can't help growing old and he has a lot on his mind. As you should know, of course, all of you.

When Charlie DiSalle was slim and twenty, sideburns down to his earlobes and duck-ass hair, they drafted him. Shaved the back of his neck. Gave him a gun. Charlie was not in any way hip or wild, and he certainly could not be described as political. When they sent him out, the thing that made him hate it was wholly this: he did not want his own only self to get killed.

He has to admit now, looking back thirty years at the scared kid jumping rustily out of the Globemaster into the heat of Tan Son Nhut, that he could have handled it in a different way. He could have got himself a break. He had been just too dumb, young and innocent to think of feeling a master sergeant up or getting caught with grass or anything like that. Smarter and older, he would have got himself into Public Information or some headquarters job. But what he had decided to do was desert. On his first search-and-destroy mission he had lagged, thrown away his weapon and ducked off the trail. He remembers how scared and detached it had felt while he had been sitting there, waiting for the V.C. to come out and collect his surrender.

The time had passed and passed. He had heard what he thought were snakes and had felt what he knew were bugs. Charlie had wet his pants that night when shooting started fifty yards away.

But he had stayed there. And stayed. And just before dawn he had blinked and opened his eyes, and had seen the little brown man with a knife in his hand. But it wasn't Charlie's surrender he had wanted. It was Charlie's life.

Scared? You know Charlie was scared. The V.C. touched him with one hand while he drew back the knife in his other, and that was the first time that Charlie ate.

Now, a thousand or ten thousand tasty tidbits later, he can still remember the sharp, glad, sweaty taste of that one. The empty V.C. straightened up and walked stumbling away, with what mattered of him left behind in Charlie DiSalle. Charlie can't tell you exactly what it was like. He thinks it must be, in a way, something like being pregnant, holding encompassed inside you that other life that is not your life. Or he thinks it could be something like writing a play. You know? With all the Romeos and Juliets and Mercutios roaming loose around the inside of your mind, not existing at all except through you? But what it was mostly like was swallowing a great big jolt of something mellow and fine.

Do you, any of you, get to share that feeling when it happens to you? Charlie can't tell. He can't feel what you feel. He reaches inside to touch you now and then, and finds some of you stolid and stunned, some wailing, some what-the-hell. But what you think or feel beyond that he cannot say.

SO he had decided maybe after all he wouldn't have to desert, had trudged thoughtfully back to the rendezvous. They had tried to hang a drug rap on him, finally busted him out on a Section 8. It

had been great trouble for them to figure that one out. All Charlie's enemies died. They went staggering away after he ate them—which, of course, no one knew he had done or could have believed—and what was left of them seldom lived an hour. It had been bad for unit morale. But how could they have stopped him? And where in the regulations does it say you shouldn't do what Charlie did? Nowhere. Giving up, they had thrown him out of the Army.

There were good years after that. Money? Charlie had all the money he wanted, out of the pockets and purses of those he ate. Women? It was the easiest thing in the world to get women. He just asked. Sometimes they said no to what he asked for, but one way or another he always got something he wanted. Friends? Well, no, that was not so good. He had no friends. There was no way for Charlie to have friends, considering how much he had to move around. But he wasn't precisely lonely in the sense that he lacked companionship with a peer group. Dears, he always had you.

And you, and you, and you. One at a time, five at a time, sometimes more. On a Union Pacific sleeper he ate a whole car, and jumped off in the morning while the porter lunged and stumbled blankly down the aisle. He nibbled a whole class out of a black nursery school near Nashville, four-year-olds and fives. They were bland and sweet and not frightened. On the car ferry from Zadar across the Adriatic he lured a plump Jug blonde to his stateroom, had her and then had her again in a way that astonished her. Then, one by one, he ate the dozen or so Italian youths who were showing off their muscles by the ship's pool, the girls who had been pretending not to see them, the purser who had sold him the stateroom. Then Charlie ate half the crew. The ship came charging full speed into Ancona with its whistle blasting in terror and Charlie had to jump over the side and swim ashore, so great was the alarm. Thereafter he tried to be more discreet.

Those years! Those endless treats! Hollywood hippics and Roman whores and a taxi driver in a fog in Berkeley Square. High over the planalto he ate a Varig purser, sweet and slow, staring out the window all the time while the rivers below turned ochre, then mauve, and joined the blue of the lakes. A floor waiter in Venice, Italy, a beachful of kids in Venice, California. An Intourist girl in Leningrad and a cable-car man on Powell Street. He loved you all dearly,

each of you and all of you—but there was always such a fuss. So much noise and panic. Such headlines in the papers, such cries on the TV.

Interpol chased him and the Security Council debated him, but he was too incredible to be in much danger from the pursuit of rational men. No one could understand what was going on. Least of all, Charlie DiSalle.

BUT he tried, give him credit for that. He tried.

He tried to find out what he was and whether he was unique. Before he ate the red-haired librarian at the Bibliotheque Nationale, he queried her for hours. He inquired of a monk at the Vatican museum. He spent a week with a mescal-eater in Yucatan. None of them could tell him anything that was of any use to know. He ate them all.

Money kept silting up in his pockets, and he found uses for it other than buying plane tickets and paying hotel bills. He banked some, built up an identity, wrote letters. A magazine editor gave him the name of a psychologist in Honolulu, and Charlie retained him for consultation: a thousand dollars on the line and two hundred dollars a day, the price high because Charlie's letters had been so queer. They arranged to meet in the lobby of a hotel on Waikiki, because Charlie was wary of receptionists who remembered faces. Charlie can see him now as he approached, his eyes closed, his head resting against an ironwood carving, an ambiguously dressed American professional wearing a jacket from Rome, a shirt from London and socks that didn't match. He looked asleep, but Charlie saw that his fingers were tapping, tapping. "Don't be nervous," said Charlie, and the man opened his eyes and said, "I'm the one who says things like that. Sit."

Now, what Charlie did was put the schole thing to him as a hypothetical question. Probably the psychologist recognized that old gambit right away. Of course he did. He sat there watching Charlie's temples pulse and he smiled to himself. But it must have been a problem to him, and perhaps he came to believe it was no gambit after all, since Charlie's situation had to sound so very hypothetical. Or did the psychologist believe it was all true?

In any case he was hired and he earned his pay. He listened

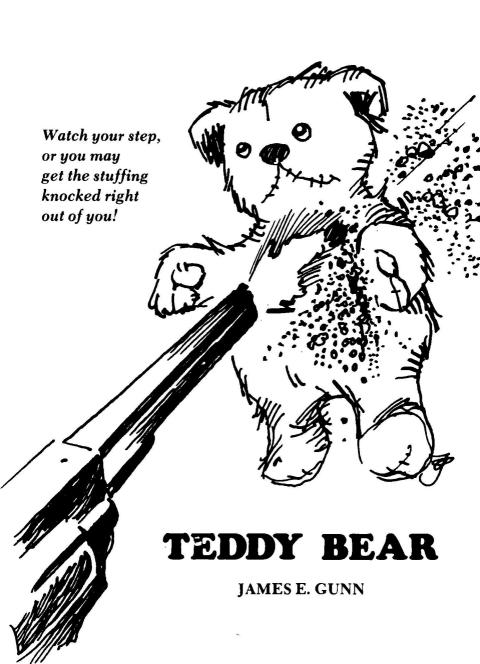
without arguing all the way through, and then he said, "No, sir. What you describe is not recorded in the literature. There is no case of anyone who lives by absorbing other people's personalities. Or souls, if you prefer. Like a vampire, you mean? No. On the other hand, do you mean the existence of multiple personalities in one mind? Yes, speaking loosely, in lay terms, such things do exist. They do not come about by the transfer of personality from one person to another, but I can tell you about them if you wish."

Charlie listened patiently to all the man had to say, but it turned out that it wasn't what Charlie wanted to know at all. The psychologist had never heard of anything like that; he went back and searched the literature, for an additional fee, and still had never heard of it. It was disheartening, and when Charlie ate the fellow at last neither enjoyed it much.

Poor Charlie, poorest Charlie, he was so alone and he hated it so. Or thought he did. But how much more he hated it when, a little later, he found out he was not, after all, unique.

W ELL, Charlie cannot ask you to feel sorry for him about that. As a matter of fact, not even I can feel really sorry for him, although I am he. For all that is ten years gone or more, and now as he roams the dwindling world he feels those others somewhere around. In Denver a waitress in a coffee shop stumbled out from behind her counter and died—she had been eaten, but not by Charlie. Those stories in the paper about Nairobi and the reports from Red China; Charlie had never been in Africa, never been in China. And then when the stories stopped, because newspapers stopped, the victims began to appear, first here, then there, then more and more. Charlie thinks he saw one like himself in the Greyhound station in Boston, and he is sure that he has been seen.

All these years they've been avoiding each other, all the children that grew to be Charlies. But how many there must now be! There is only the one measure of it, and that is how few there are left to eat. It cannot be long now, that time when all you edibles are gone and the Charlies turn to each other. What an hour that will be, when Charlie meets another like himself and the casual snack turns out to be a devourer, too. And when Charlie is gobbled he'll scream. I think, with all your million throats.



I TOOK that last step, and my foot sank into something soft. I pulled back, and immediately felt foolish. I knew what it was.

Lying on the cement of the porch, his sliding black pupils intent in their plastic corneas as he tried to understand the stars, was Brownie—Kit's teddy bear.

Always something where it shouldn't be: a toy bear, a round block, a tricycle. Kids! You try to correct them and they say, "But I didn't leave it there, Daddy." You would like to believe them but you can't. They must be lying. Or is there an innate perversity in playthings that sneaks them into the way of the careless foot or the carefree shin? As if inanimate objects could want us lame or dead?

You can't believe that, not unless you're crazy.

I picked up Brownie. He dripped.

I let the stuff trickle onto my hand. Sawdust. I turned him over. Excelsior bulged through a slit in his abdomen.

I felt a little sick, imagining some childish hand slashing Brownie in a fit of anger. Or worse, cold malice.

Please, I thought, not Kit. Don't let it be Kit.

I was trying to shove the excelsior back into the teddy bear when I remembered. The afternoon's tragedy returned to me, as vivid and real as when it had happened. Tires screaming like living things. The echoing mechanical scream of the woman. But they had not been the worst.

The worst had been rushing to help and then freezing in my tracks. The woman's body on the street had looked just like Brownie with the stuffing coming out, much cleaner and neater than anyone would expect and infinitely more horrible. Sawdust and excelsior. Nothing else.

Everything came back, even the numb feeling when my mind had refused to work. I had heard the man next to me saying, with grisly, unconscious humor, "Well, it sure knocked the stuffing out of her."

And then my cold thought: Some of us aren't real. Somebody slipped.

But that last had been a foolish thought. I was not prepared to accept the inevitable consequences. It meant that—

Someone called my name.

I swung around. There had been no warning footsteps-at least,

I had not heard any. But a tall, heavy man stood on my porch. He wore a blue uniform with bright buttons. The light shining through the old-fashioned front door gleamed on the buttons and flashed from the badge on his chest. A cop.

"Yes?" A police car was behind mine at the curb. A few seconds before it had not been there.

"Come along." He looked down at me, strength clothed in authority, his face impassive.

"Where?"

"To the station. You're wanted as a witness."

"To what?"

"To that accident this afternoon. If you'll just come with me, Mr. Gunn, we'll get this over in a hurry. All we want is a statement—"

"I don't want to go with you," I said, trying to make it firm. But to my horror my voice sounded high-pitched and squeaky like that of a child refusing to go to the dentist. Inside me a chant of terror was growing: How did they know my name? Nobody took down my name. How did they find me?

There probably was a simple explanation but I could not think of it. And I could not ask because that would be admitting I had been there. Suddenly I was afraid to do that.

"You have no choice, sir," the cop said.

"You can't just walk up to a man in his home and haul him off without a warrant or anything—"

"The only one who tells me what I can't do is the Chief," the cop said politely. "Come along, now."

"But I didn't see any accident."

"Sure you did," the cop said. "We've got your name on our list." He shook his head unhappily. "You not only saw it, you remember it. Somebody sure slipped on this one."

Turning incredulously, I. . .

...was sitting on a hard jail cot. The scene had shifted, or so it seemed. One instant I had been standing on my porch talking to the officer, the next I was in a dark cell.

I had no memory of anything in between.

My head did not hurt, but I raised my left hand to it anyway.

There were no lumps. Brownie was in my right hand. I stared down at the teddy bear, blankly, trying to figure out things.

Some new gas, I thought. Odorless. Non-toxic. Knocked me out.

Only—why was I in jail?

You not only saw it, the policeman had said, you remember it. Somebody sure slipped on this one.

He had been talking about the accident. Of course I remembered it. Why shouldn't I remember it? It had happened, hadn't it? I had seen it, hadn't I?

Suddenly, sitting there, I was not so sure. What had happened had more the texture of nightmare than reality. Persons are not stuffed—not with sawdust and excelsior or kapok or—

Suddenly it struck me. All was a dream: the accident, the cop.

This, too?

Brownie felt real enough, his fake fur crisp against my hand, the sawdust trickling from him gritty between my fingers. I pulled out my handkerchief and tied it around him like a sash to keep him from sifting away before I got him home.

Home? But I was home right now. Why was I accepting this jail as reality? Surely I was home and the rest was all a dream.

The metal of the cot frame felt hard and cold under my hand.

I crossed to the cell door and called out. "Hey!" No answer. "Hey!" I rattled the metal bars. "Hey!"

Someone came at last. A gloomy man in blue. "What's the matter?" he growled.

"I want out."

"They all do."

"I've no business being in here—"

"Nobody has."

"It's some mistake," I insisted. "I was supposed to go to the station as a witness to a traffic accident. The next thing I knew I was in this cell."

"No use trying to pull that stuff on me. I won't testify for you. What you need is a psychiatrist. Wait for the trial."

"What trial?"

"Your trial! If you're lucky, you might get off with manslaughter."

He turned his back and moved away, chuckling. I sank down

weakly on the cot. Manslaughter? Had † killed somebody? The cop? Of course not. An armed man, as big and experienced as he was? And I hadn't the least memory—

That was the catch. No memory. People black out. Madness overwhelms them, drives away their memories of violence... Could I really have killed someone?

I sat stonily on the cot, probing my mind and emotions. What does madness feel like? What are the symptoms? I could not detect any signs in myself except memories I had and memories I lacked. Did they mean anything?

And how does a man behave if he thinks he might be mad? If he acts on the presumption that he is, then he would not be, would he?

But then, every madman must come to the same conclusion: if I am mad, it does not matter how I act; but if I am sane, I would be foolish to act as if I were mad.

I took a deep breath. All right. Though I might be dreaming, I must act as if I were awake. And though I might be mad, I must act as if I were sane.

I clutched Brownie, and wondered what day it was. Where were Kit and Jane? What were they doing? Did they know what had happened to me? Did they know I was at home—or, if I were not there, did they think I had deserted them?

Despair filled me. I was trapped like a fly in some invisible web. That accident with its shocking revelation—the incident on the porch—the abrupt shift to the cell. . .

Meaningless. My predicament reminded me of Kit's games with Silky, the yellow-and-black striped tiger—with Pinky, the dog whose fur was now more gray than pink—with Pandy. . "Now we're on a train," Kit would say. "We're going to Grammy's, and I'm the engineer. . . We're there. You're a tiger, Silky, and you're in the jungle and I'm going to kill you. . . Mommy, I want a drink. . ."

And there the animals would sit, lifeless, where he had left them—the reproved and the punished, the hunted, the companions, the finally cuddled—until he returned to take up the game again as if nothing had happened. Did they wonder, these tormented toys, at the sudden changes, the inexplicable shifts, the childish moods that switched with the wind?

Did they wonder where Kit had gone? No. For them nothing happened except when Kit was there. Time was only when Kit willed time to be. The game did not start until he said, "Begin!"

He would be missing Brownie.

When would I see Kit again?

A wave of grief swept over me, and I covered my face with my hand. My thought at the accident came back: Somebody slipped. Why had the cop echoed it: Somebody sure slipped on this one?

Crazy, crazy.

I decided that I was the unwitting central figure in some vast and incomprehensible plot. Behind it was someone who knew why the woman hit by the truck had been stuffed with sawdust and excelsior.

I would not give up, I thought. I would fight.

I started going through my clothes. I found my pocket knife, and that was all. That was the only thing they had left me. Odd they had not taken it away.

Maybe they had missed it. Was that possible? I recalled that prisoners are always coming up with unexpected things: knives, poison, saws, guns.

I started honing the blade methodically on the sole of my shoe, stering down. . .

...at the lean jailor. Sawdust and excelsior were spilling through a hele in his chest.

I sensed that. . .

the courtroom was crowded even before I turned to look around. I was sitting at a polished table. In front of me a judge sat behind his elevated desk. A chair to his left was occupied by a witness a middle-aged man I had never seen before.

Against the wall to my right I could see the jury, twelve soberfaced men and women listening intently to the testimony...

Bewildered, I shook my head. What had made the hole in the jailor's chest? The knife I had been sharpening? What had happened after I stood over his body, shocked, immobile, watching the stuffing pile up on the floor?

A man beside me I recognized as Orin Porter, the lawyer I

would have if I ever needed a lawyer. "What's happening?" I said.

"Shhh!" He raised a finger to his lips. He was listening to the testimony, too.

"...and I saw this man push the woman in front of the truck," the witness was saying earnestly.

Standing near him was a dapper little man in a gray pinstripe suit. Lawyer? Prosecutor? "Did you ever see the man before?"

"No, sir."

"Have you seen him since?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"Here-in this courtroom."

"Can you point him out?"

"Yes, sir. That's him. That's the man." The finger of the witness pointed straight at me.

I jumped to my feet. "I didn't push anybody," I shouted. "I don't know what you're talking—"

Porter yanked me down hard. "Shut up," he said. "You'll prejudice the judge—"

"The defendant will control himself or the court will be forced to do it for him," the judge said coldly. He was a narrow-faced and obviously intolerant man. His eyes were too close together. To me he seemed determined that I should hang.

Only they didn't hang people any more. Not in this state. "Look, I didn't push anybody," I whispered to Porter. "If they are talking about that accident, I was just a witness—"

"You have been positively identified six times," Porter said, frowning. "Five of the witnesses saw you push the girl."

"But I didn't even know her. I had no reason—"

"It's been established that you visited the girl's apartment several times when you were supposed to be working." A distaste disturbed Porter's professionally neutral expression. "Jane's broken up about it."

"Mad, mad," I whispered, staring blankly into the distance. "Have they brought out the part about the sawdust? The sawdust and excelsior that came out of the woman, the stuffing—"

Porter studied me for a moment before he said, "Maybe you're right. An insanity plea is your only hope."

"What about the jailor?" I pleaded. "Did he die? Are they going to do anything about him?"

"What jailor?" Porter asked, his eyebrows compressed. "Are you holding something back?"

I shook my head and sat down. Life had suddenly become too twisted ever to be straightened out. I was on trial for pushing a woman I had never seen into the path of a truck. And the jailor was forgotten.

I needed some kind of explanation, but the only one I could think of was too terrible to entertain. If I were not mad, then someone was framing me with incredible efficiency for a crime I had not committed.

Why? There could only be one reason. I had seen the accident and recognized the truth about the woman who was killed. I knew she was not human.

Who was framing me was the unanswerable part. Because anyone who could frame me in that fashion—who could convince a dozen witnesses they had seen something they could not have seen, who could identify me when no one knew my name, who could shift me through space and time—why, such a person and his ways had to be beyond understanding.

Attribute it all to the supernatural? The terror lay chiefly in that thought. Yet it explained everything so well. I had stumbled on a secret no one was supposed to know, the secret that some of us are not human, are not real, that some of us—the girl, the jailor—are stuffed with sawdust and excelsior like teddy bears, that even the real ones are moved about by supernatural beings for reasons we could never understand.

And, having stumbled on this basic truth, I had to die or be so discredited that my revelations would be discounted as madness or a self-serving simulation of it.

I looked around the courtroom. Anyone might be a puppet, a teddy bear: the witnesses who came to the chair and lied, the jury. . .

"...will consider its verdict," the judge said grimly.

I hardly noticed the shifts any more. My fantastic speculations went on uninterrupted.

Fantastic, but not so hard to believe. The theory explained the observable facts of existence as well as our naive "realism." What do we know, really? Only what we are told. And what we are told has no inevitable correlation with reality.

Why couldn't people be stuffed? I had never seen an operation or an autopsy. All I knew about the interior of the human body was hearsay and the vague consciousness I had of my own inner workings.

Was it so incredible that there should be teddy bears among us, moved willy-nilly at the whim of supernatural beings? Was it fantastic that the whole world should be the stage for extra-dimensional puppeteers? Yes, yes it was. But no more incredible, no more fantastic, than what had happened to me.

A workable hypothesis has to account for every fact, and only mine accounted for my shattering experiences.

I tried to think. After all, what did I know, for instance, of other cities, foreign lands? I had visited some of them, sure—or at least I had a memory of doing so, which is not the same thing—but how little of the planet's extent had I experienced myself. It was only an infinitesimal part of what I was asked to believe.

I accepted China on faith and India and all the vast, teeming East. Why, Africa could be a fiction, for all I knew. I had no trustworthy proof that Australia really existed or Europe or even England.

The testimony of maps was the chief evidence for the reality of much of the United States, and only history books propagated the illusion in me that the world had existed before my consciousness. . .

And what of memory, a poor fallible thing as everyone knows? Surely it was obvious that memories can be planted in people's minds like tulip bulbs in flower beds. Let those who think they have special knowledge of this fact or that, of the nature of the world or the workings of the human body, which will shatter my feeble theory—let them reflect on the elusive origins of memory and the success of even us inept mortals in hypnosis and psychiatry and brain-washings. . .

And I must be immune from this tyranny of memory because I am real, I thought. I am human, and that is why my knowledge is dangerous.

And the independence of my thoughts proves my reality, my humanity, because surely a teddy bear can think only those thoughts that are thought for him.

Teddy bear? I looked down. In the chair beside me was Brownie, still wearing the handkerchief around his middle. I picked him up. My probing finger found the gash.

That had not changed. Well, why should it? Which would have been proof of my suspicions: Brownie slashed or Brownie whole?

I shook my head angrily. There was no way of proving anything. I was hopelessly trapped. I might as well surrender to whatever fate was planned for me. A man cannot fight the gods.

Thrusting my hands deep in my pockets, I touched the knife. I pulled it out and snapped open the blade. It was sharp, honed—much keener than I had ever kept it. A few bits of sawdust clung to the blade.

Proof! Maybe not to anybody else, but to me. They could not think of everything—they made mistakes, like everybody else. I laughed. The little inconsistencies of life people dismiss so casually, I realized, were the ultimate and unshakable proof that we are not the masters of our world or of our destinies!

A world functioning according to orderly natural law—that's the picture most people believe in even if they cannot see it. But such a hypothesis is really shaky, full of holes, tottering on a patchwork foundation of faith. Too much is inexplicable—which is proof that the world is not a world of order, that nature is not understandable and subject to law.

Mysterious disappearances occur, like those of Ambrose Bierce and Judge Crater. (Had they learned too much?) And it came to me, here in the courtroom, that there are numerous small things that give the game away, if we would only notice. Objects, for example, are not where they should be or they are found where they should not be. We forget how often it happens because the objects are little and unimportant: clothing, toys, supplies, implements. . . Knives disappear, and needles, spools and spatulas; socks vanish and buttons, cuff links and belts; marbles are gone and jacks, tops and checkers; staples never diminish gradually—suddenly the cupboard is bare.

Poor Mother Hubbard. Pitiful dog.

Other things: paper clips, clothes hangers, rubber bands, string, pencils, wrapping paper, glue, nails, screws. . . One person may find them always at hand although he never buys any of them. Another may buy these trifles constantly and never find any when he wants them.

Explain it? Shrug? Indict human memory? Exalt the supremacy of *things?* There's a better explanation: carelessness.

Not our carelessness. Theirs.

All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. So Shakespeare said. What he would have added was that the play is too vast and obscure for us ever to understand. Why has no true science of psychology ever been developed? Why does a workable science of sociology seem impossible? Because of the teddy bears, I told myself. Stuffed people. Their actions can be explained never by human logic but by extra human whimsy.

Again I laughed. How clearly I saw it all!

Why do so many people refuse to be swayed by logic? Why do so many misguided idiots cling stubbornly to their false values, call their demagogues saviors, get into fights and riots and wars? Because they are teddy bears. Puppets manipulated by invisible gods or other supernatural beings. Judas goats leading the sheep into the slaughter house. The mob leading humanity into darkness and pain and distrust.

I slid the knife along my arm and watched the thin, red line follow behind it, broadening as the blood welled. I sighed. At least I wasn't one of the teddy bears.

Porter was staring down at my arm and the knife in my hand. "For God's sake, man," he whispered fiercely "put that thing away!"

But the foreman of the jury was speaking. "Guilty," he said, and the judge. . .

...felt limp and lifeless under my hand, clutching his shoulder. I was standing behind him, my right hand over the judge's shoulder, pressed to his robe, and I was looking out over the court and all the horrified white faces.

One of them I knew. It was paler than all the rest, and the anguish in it brought tears to my eyes. I stepped back. The knife in

my right hand came away. The judge, released, toppled slowly, turning a little in his chair. His thin vindictive face was relaxed; his close-set eyes unseeing.

Sawdust streamed out of the slit beneath his vest.

I started forward blindly toward Jane, in spite of the uniforms that rose in front of me, and the hands that clutched at me to hold me back, and I. . .

...was lying flat on the ground. It was night, and I was cold. The earth was cold under me, cold against my shirt, against my thin trousers, and I wondered where I was.

Bushes were in front of me, branching darkly against the night. As I reached out to part them, I realized that the knife was still in my hand. I closed it and put it away.

Something furry was beside me. Brownie. I smiled grimly. I could lose everything else—innocence, responsibility, love, life—but I could not lose Brownie. It was comforting to have him there.

I understood now why Kit could not go to sleep without his friend. Whatever terrifying shapes and places contorted the protean night, Brownie was the familiar, unchanging reality to which a frightened child could cling.

Kit and I, frightened children both.

I walked for a time, found myself on a dim, winding street that I recognized. Porter's house was the nearest one, there with the light in the living room behind the picture window. That man reading in the chair, that must be Orin.

Whatever the risk, I had to see him. I had to know what had happened.

I crept toward his lawn between the bushes, and their bristles and brambles shredded my flimsy illusion of nightmare with their rough reality. Keeping to the shadows, watchful for movements or darkened cars, I edged toward the two-foot square slab of concrete that served the ranch-style house as porch.

I punched the bell and turned my back to the door so that I could watch the dark street, feeling like a character in a B-grade gangster movie.

The door opened. I turned. It was Orin, incandescence haloing his head. He blinked into the darkness. "Who is it?" he asked, and

flipped on the little entrance light. He saw me and gasped. "Get in here!"

In the living room, I sank wearily into a chair. Orin pulled the draw drapes across the picture window and turned to me impatiently. I sat heavily, hugging Brownie to me, feeling a little foolish "What's happened?" I asked.

"Judge Marsh died twenty minutes ago. The police are turning the city upside down. They have orders to shoot if you resist arrest—"

"How did I escape from the courtroom?"

"Don't you remember?" Porter exclaimed.

"The last I remember, a dozen men were reaching for me."

Porter shook his head in disbelief. "I can't understand how you got this far out. Your picture is all over town! No taxi would carry you, or a bus—and it's almost ten miles. You didn't walk, did you?"

"I don't know," I said wearily. "They've shifted me around too much. You saw the judge, I guess. You saw the sawdust spilling out of him?"

Porter stared at me with eyes that were suddenly wise. "So you're crazy," he whispered. "Truly crazy—"

"No," I said quickly. "You see—" But words were not equal to the task of explaining, of convincing Porter.

"I'll fix you a drink," he said, heading for the kitchen. "Come on. It will do you good. Then you're going to give yourself up. Don't worry—we'll get you off—"

"No! That's what They want."

"Sure. Come on. We'll talk about it."

He made the drink strong and tall and cool and left me with it. I sipped it numbly, trying to make sense out of insanity.

Maybe it's like Miguel de Unamuno asked, I thought. I remembered well his remarkable speculation. Is the world—and mankind with it—only a dream of God? Are prayer and ritual nothing but attempts to make Him more drowsy so that He does not wake up and stop our dreaming?

But even if that were true, to call existence a dream would not diminish it. Dreams can bleed. I proved that.

I looked at my arm. A thin white scar crossed it. That was quick healing. Another slip?

Once more I took out the knife. I opened the blade and tapped the handle against my palm. Sawdust. The blade itself was untarnished, unstained. Surely if the judge and the jailor had been real, their blood would have clotted on the blade. They had not been actual humans, but teddy bears.

Yet how could I convince Porter or anyone else? They would see Brownie, and in their cynical wisdom would know where the sawdust came from. They would see stuffed humans and not believe their eyes, because they would not know where the sawdust came from.

Porter had been gone a long time. I got up, the knife forgotten in my hand, and pushed through the door and surprised him. He had the telephone to his ear. As he looked at me, his eyes were frightened before he veiled them. He said, "Well, that's all right, then. Thanks for calling."

He was putting on an act. The phone had not rung.

I moved toward him, hurt. "I didn't think you'd turn me in."

"I wouldn't do that," he said weakly. "I swear I wouldn't."

"You shouldn't have turned me in, Orin. If you only knew what I've been through—"

"Put the knife away," he said, his voice strained and off-key. "You don't need the knife. You'll hurt yourself."

I looked down at the knife in my hand, and he sprang at me. Reflexively I raised my arm, twisted away from him. He plunged onto the knife.

PORTER'S face worked for a moment close to mine, trying to get out words through a strangled throat. A spasm crossed his face. He collapsed, pulling free of the knife.

How easily they die, I thought dully. You wouldn't think a teddy bear would die so easily.

From the slash across his belly came a thin sifting of yellow saw. . .

...dust rose from my running feet. I could feel it deep in my lungs, and it sifted through the air, diffusing the radiance of the street light ahead. I was fleeing through an alley unpaved and rough under my feet.

"Stop!" bellowed a voice behind me. "Stop, you!"

I didn't stop. A gun barked. The bullet whined past my head. I dodged, panting, into a dark yard, ducking clothes lines and avoiding the dark traps of bushes with an odd prescience until I reached a narrow walk between houses and raced along it.

"Stop!" the voice yelled again, far behind.

I had lost him. Lungs burning, I eased into a trot, turning down a driveway and reaching a sidewalk. The neighborhood was anonymous in the night. It could have been any collection of older fiveroom bungalows and thirty-foot frontages. When I reached the corner I would find out.

If I were not crazy, that is. I thought maybe I was crazy, after all. We've all had the thought that we were all alone in a hostile world, that we were the only real person in a make-believe world, that unseen, malicious forces are combined against us. . .that's the common delusion of adolescence, and usually it fades.

If it does not, if the delusion becomes systematized and the senses begin to support it with false messages. that's insanity. Oh, my case answered the classic description of paranoia: exaggerated suspicion leading to a lasting, irradicable, delusional system of persecution and grandeur.

Also, homicidal.

The only trouble with the theory was that I wanted too much to believe it. I would rather be insane than have my speculations true. It had to be one or the other, and I would rather believe that I was crazy than that everybody but me was a thing stuffed with sawdust and maneuvered by some supernatural or extradimensional intelligence to trap me into the monstrous and unthinkable. . .

Why should I be thus manipulated? I could not expect ever to know. The motives of the supernatural must be inexplicable, or it would be natural.

So it was either one or the other, and I thought: Let me be mad! But the thought was too sane.

I hesitated at the corner, under a street light, and I looked up at the sign. Before I could read it, a beam of light blazed into my eyes.

I clenched them tight and hid behind my arm, realizing only then that Brownie was dangling by one leg from my hand. "Stop!" said an amplified voice. "Don't move. This is the police."

I ran, dodging across a lawn and up on a porch while the spotlight tried vainly to find me and the loudspeaker roared.

Where are the people who live inside, I thought wildly. Or is it only a false front like a movie set with nobody behind it? All false fronts...?

I hammered on the strange front. . .

...door, only it was not strange after all. It was my own front door, and the street behind me was quiet, dark and deserted.

The living room light came on, and through the fog of curtain behind the pane of the door I saw Jane coming toward me, pulling a robe around her. She opened the door until it was stopped by the night chain. "Who is it?" she asked. And then, "It's you!"

I pulled open the screen and pushed my way into the house. It was good to be home, even as a fugitive. I wasn't going to run any more. Let them come and get me here.

I dropped into my own deep chair and sighed. Let it be a dream, I prayed.

After a moment I looked up at Jane. Her face told me the truth.

"So it really happened," I said.

"Yes. You're crazy, aren't you?"

"I suppose so," I agreed wearily. "That's the best explanation, isn't it?"

She nodded and turned her face away. The light from the red lamp glittered on the unspilled teardrops in her eyes. She wiped them away. "I can't understand," she said. "I've tried but I can't —that woman, then the judge, then your best friend—"

"Stuffed," I mused. "All stuffed. The jailor, too. Teddy bears." I looked down at Brownie. He had come with me through everything. I pulled the handkerchief free and held him out to Jane. "Sew him up," I said. "I don't want Kit to see him like that."

She took the teddy bear and looked at the slit across his abdomen. "No," she said softly, "that would be the worst."

She thought I'd slashed the toy. A denial rose to my lips, but I forced it back. What difference did it make? "Where is Kit?"

"I sent him over to your mother's. I didn't think it would be good for him here."

Or safe, I thought. "But you stayed."

"I thought you'd come home if you could."

"Yes." I watched her sew up the slit neatly with brown thread. I wished all things could be mended as easily. I wished I could tell her what had happened to me. No use. "You won't turn me in, will you?"

"No. It won't be necessary. They've been watching the house. Before they come, will you tell me why?"

I sighed. "All right. Some people are real—some are only stuffed, like Brownie there. Filled with sawdust and excelsior, shoved around in some great extra-dimensional game by things moving behind the scenes who are masters of time and space. Crazy, isn't it? But that's the way it is."

She smiled contemptuously. "It's easy enough to prove I'm real. Give me your knife."

I opened it for her and handed it to her. I waited for her to cut her arm as I had cut mine. Instead, wearing a superior smile, she plunged the knife into her abdomen.

My hand went over my eyes, clawing at my face to shut out the sight. But the image was imprinted indelibly on my retina—the look of surprise on her face, and the sawdust that seeped dustily where the knife had entered.

And I knew, finally, what the truth was.

It was the first really crazy thing that anyone else had done. It was senseless by any standards. Jane had not known she was a teddy bear. Someone had pulled her string. And there could not be any reason for it.

There was, when I thought back, no satisfactory reason for anything They had done. They had not needed to put me through so much in order to silence me. They could simply have killed me and got it over with.

No. No reason to set up this scene in my home and all the other scenes. No reason. But a purpose.

I saw it, now. That purpose was-amusement!

It had been a game. A grisly sort of game of blind man's buff, with a knife in my hand and my eyes opened too wide. . .

The sort of game a child would play with his stuffed animals.

So we humans were the nursery toys of an extra-dimensional

child. We were his teddy bears, performing for his diversion.

Maybe he learned something from us, the way children do from toys and games. Or maybe we were not that important.

Possibly there came times in the game when the extra-dimensional adults stepped in, when the child grew too abandoned, when the teddy bears were in danger of complete destruction. Maybe they fixed everything up again, just as Jane had mended Brownie. . .

The light burned against the front door, and the voice boomed from the loudspeaker in the street. "Come out! We know you're in there."

"All right," I muttered. "I'm coming. I'm coming."

The question was: could a man rebel?

I found the gun in Kit's toy chest and stepped to the front door and opened it, squinting my eyes against the glare. With a flip of my wrist I raised the revolver into view. The chatter of an automatic rifle did violence to the street, to me.

As the slugs stitched their way across my side, I toppled slowly, my hand cupped to the pain. It caught the sawdust as it trickled onto. . .

... the porch, and I stopped, my hand pressed to the stitch in my side. I took a breath and thought ruefully that I wasn't as young as I used to be. I was going to have to start taking those steps a little slower.

My foot sank into something soft. I pulled back and felt foolish. I knew what it was.

Lying on the cement of the porch, his sliding black pupils intent in their plastic corneas as he tried to understand the stars, was Brownie—Kit's teddy bear.

I picked him up. Jane had done a good job on the slit in his abdomen where Kit had played doctor the other day. He would not do that again. He understood now that toys were to play with, not to destroy.

I wished for a moment that I was a child again and could have tattered toys rather than tattered illusions. Toys often can be fixed.

But I shrugged and opened the door and said, "Jane, Kit, I'm home."

Like that didn't happen every evening.

WALKER BETWEEN THE PLANES (Continued from page 22)

"Sit down," she said, catching his shoulders and pushing him.

The edge of the bed caught the back of his knees and he sat down heavily. "No, people can't change bodies any time they want," she said. "The person giving the body has to have signed his life away according to the law under the Magi. A fine thing it would be if a person could change bodies whenever he wished! A criminal could disappear from the eyes of justice any time he felt like it. The Magi have to approve each transfer, don't you see?"

DOUG'S mind was clicking off conclusions. "Where do these Cadda Noyer—where's their headquarters?"

"Their local Aerie? Or their Chief High Aerie?"

"The one nearest to that Sorcerer Aerie where Kathang used to work—where that Portal is."

"You mean the local Aerie," she said.

She stepped around his bed and pointed off at a tower perhaps five miles distant. He stared at it. There was an illusory shadow hand before his eyes. It blurred fantastically. He seemed to see telescopically, shadowedly, into the very interior of the tower, where two figures lay still in an underground room.

"How do I get there?"

"You?" Once more there was that strange softness mixed with the sharpness of her voice and gaze. "You get there by flying fifty feet out beyond your bed. Half a dozen of the Cadda Noyer will escort you personally to the Aerie. I told you that they're waiting—"

Baffled, he stared at the tower. Like a huge gray finger it pointed upright in the distance, half threatening, half beckoning.

"What happens to dead bodies?" he asked.

She frowned at him.

"They're held several days to make sure all life is gone. Then a Magus is called in to certify to the death. The individual's name is removed from both Brotherhood and community rolls. Then the body is burned." Anvra continued to frown. "Why?" she asked. "Why did you want to know that?"

"I have a body around here somewhere—the real body I was born

with." He added thoughtfully, "There must be some way of getting into that tower."

"The Cadda Noyer Aerie? You want to get in there? Well, you're not Kathang, that's clear." She shook her head impatiently. "Do you think Aeries are built so they can be gotten into? What use would an Aerie be if anybody could get in without the permission of the Brotherhood owning it?"

He was still gazing at the tower. It seemed to him that his mind had never been so clear and swift-moving. The shadow hand was gone but the blurred image of the two motionless figures in the room flashed in and out of his brain.

Doug swung on her.

"You're a Water Witch, you said." He watched her. "Doesn't that tower have water and sewer connections?"

"Of course," she answered. Then she paled and seemd to shrink from him. "You're not thinking of invading the aerie through the underground piping?"

"I'm in no position to be finicky—"

"Finicky!" She shuddered. "No, you're not Kathang. You're not even a normal human being!"

The horror in her face went beyond ordinary squeamishness at the thought of passage through a sewer. She was plainly shaken by some deeper emotion.

"What's so bad about your pipes, Anvra?"

"They are...underground. Underground! Away from the light and the air. Away from the sky!"

Then he understood. He remembered the note in Jax's voice when Jax had spoken about Earth's people as wingless, about the Earth as the Damned World. To a flying people, being without wings would literally be hell. And being forced underground—where they could not use wings, where they were locked from their natural open environment—would be double hell.

All the better, thought Doug grimly. If such were the case, there was that much more chance he could travel through the piping unobserved.

"As you say." He rose again to his feet, fending her off as she tried to stop him. "I'm different. Let's see if you can't find me a route to their tower through its water or sewer pipes."

LESS than an hour later, his thin brown legs were encased in hiphigh boots of some thin rubbery material. He was clothed, all but his arms, in an insulated one-piece suit of the same stuff. Anvra had found the garments for him.

Doug stood beyond a water-tight door at the top of three steps leading into a tunnel perhaps ten feet in diameter. He was in the sub-basement of the Water Witches' tower. The tunnel—a great metal pipe—seemed lit by a phosphorescence covering all the surfaces above the ankle-deep water. The pipe ran straight, losing itself in brilliance both far ahead and far behind.

The pipe was not one of the sewers, Anvra had said. It was part of the storm-drain system. In case of a flash rainstorm, anyone in the drain would be swept away and drowned. But this was not the time of year for thunderstorms. Now only a bare trickle of water was pumped into the drains to nourish the fungus that coated the drain walls and illuminated their interiors for the benefit of the slave working crews.

Doug stepped down into the drainpipe and felt the water tugging at his ankles. A splashing behind him made him turn. Anvra, carrying the pipe-charts for the area between this tower and that of the Cadda Noyer Aerie, had entered the water behind him.

"All right." He reached for the charts. "I'll take those."

"Will you?" she said, holding on to them. "And how are you going to read them?"

He saw that she, too, had on a pair of the rubbery wading boots.

"You aren't going with me?"

"I am," she said. "You can't read the charts. You're no Water Witch! You can't even read the pipe markings. You'd never get there."

He respected her courage. A flying woman, she was forcing herself to go underground, swallowing her horror.

"Your self-obligation at work again, I suppose?"

"That's right." She was tight-lipped.

"Well. . . thank you," he said. He started forward. The rounded surface underfoot obliged them to walk single file and he heard her splashing along behind him.

Doug was geniuinely touched. Kathang must have been a damn fool not to have appreciated this female more than he had. Loyalty such as Anvra showed was something to admire.

THUS began the long wading trip through the phosphorescent corridor. They said nothing except when they came to an intersection or a branching. Then Anvra would stop briefly to compare her charts with the markings on the pipe wall at that point. She would give directions and they would move on.

She had explained earlier that there was no direct route from the Water Witches' tower to that of the Cadda Noyer. In effect, the distance to the tower would be almost doubled by the route they had to take.

Doug had held himself to a slow, steady pace from the start, remembering how his legs on occasion had threatened to betray him. In spite of his precautions, after a time he felt his thigh-muscles beginning to ache. The ache woke him to the fact that had not previously registered on him. The water through which they had been wading had deepened gradually until now he was slogging through in knee-depth. Also, there was a new, strange ache—across his back. He discovered that he was, instinctively, holding his wingtips high above the wet.

A sudden, different sound of splashing sounded behind him. He swung about—to see Anvra stumbling, going down into the water. He moved to catch her just in time. She was a limp weight in his arms. Looking down at her in the eerie light of the phosphorescence, he saw that her eyes were closed.

Her face looked like a death mask in old ivory. Her wings were soaked clear to the feathers of their top joints. Plainly, the massed feathers took up water like a sponge. Anvra, being shorter and weaker, had not been able to hold her lower wingtips out of the water as Doug had done. She felt heavy in his arms with the added weight of liquid, and she was icy cold.

"Anvra!" He had noticed that her hands were empty. She must have dropped the charts.

He shook her. Her eyes fluttered open.

"Anvra," he said. "where are we? Are we headed for the tower?" "Straight...ahead..."

Her eyes closed again.

"How far?" he demanded. "How far, Anvra?"

But she was no longer answering.

He lifted her in his arms—one hand up under her wing-sockets, one hand under her knees—and waded heavily forward. After forty or fifty steps his arms began to tremble with the load. He was forced to stop.

Supporting her with an effort, he pulled off one by one his two hip-length leg-coverings. The thin material was as easy to handle as cloth. He knotted the feet together and the tops to each other to form a loop. He put this loop around his neck. Lifting Anvra into it as into a supporting sling, he moved forward once more.

But soon the weariness of his legs became pronounced. He stopped to rest, leaning against the cold side of the pipe, then went on, stopped a little later, went on and stopped again. . he was staggering forward more by a reflex of the survival instinct than anything else.

SUDDENLY Doug tripped over some steps at the side of the tunnel and sprawled off balance to his right, spilling Anvra through an open door to the stone floor of a room above water-level.

He dragged himself up beside her. It was some little time before feeling began to come back to his water-numbed legs. He set about rubbing some circulation back into Anvra's limbs, too. After a while her eyes opened.

"All right," he said. He gathered her still-chilled body to his warmer one. She made no sound. He held her until he suddenly became conscious of a new dampness against his chest.

He looked down, startled. Her face was as expressionless as if she were yet unconscious, and her eyes were closed. But from under the closed lids, tears were streaming down her cheeks.

"Anvra—" he blurted. "What is it? Are you hurt?"

"I failed you," she said dully.

"Failed me? You got your wings wet. That wasn't your fault."

"At the last, I couldn't help you. . ." It was a terrible, soundless weeping. He realized that in spite of what she said it was not him she had failed. It was that stern personal code of hers—that creed of self-obligation.

He hugged her to him comfortingly. After a while, she stirred and lifted her head.

"Don't forget," he said, "I'm not Kathang. You don't really owe me a thing."

"You're many times what Kathang was," she said, not looking at him. "And I owe you all I've got to give."

She rose to her feet, then. He stood up also, and for the first time he looked about him. They were in a small bare room that was almost the twin of the one at the Water Witches' tower behind the water-tight door through which they had entered the drainpipe. Floor and walls were of what seemed to be concrete.

He could hear a faint rushing sound. It seemed to come from the corridor off a room they could see beyond the open inner door of the room they were now standing in.

"Blowers," said Anvra. "The Cadda Noyer must have many deep-rooms under this Aerie." She turned her face to him. Though it was still white from chill and exhaustion, her eyes glowed. "There might—I mean, it's possible they have something to hide from the Magi. If so, maybe you can dicker with them to leave you alone as the price of keeping your mouth shut."

She started toward the inner door. He followed.

THE corrider led past several other bare rooms to end at last in a chamber no larger than a walk-in closet.

"An elevator," Anvra explained. She touched its wall. A small panel slid aside, uncovering a vertical row of square studs. Apparently Anvra's people did not like their devices or controls to be out in plain sight.

The doors of the elevator closed and she touched the bottom-most stud. He felt the familiar, stomach-floating sensation of a rapid elevator descent.

The doors opened again before them. They stepped into still another room. A room with no doors other than the one through which they had emerged.

Anvra made a sharp but barely audible sound like a curse and jumped back into the elevator. Her fingers ran rapidly over the area of the studs and a facing panel fell off, revealing a tangled maze of small transparent tubes filled with green liquid.

"It may fool wingless slave," Anvra whispered. "But I'm on the Secrets Committee of my own Aerie—"

She twisted and pinched a couple of the small tubes together. They melted into one another and the green liquid drained from the section of transparent tubing below the pinched spot in the vertical one of the two tubes.

One whole wall slid aside. Beyond it lay a brightly lit expanse as immense as an aircraft hangar, filled with equipment.

"Space!" murmured Anvra with relief. She ran into the huge room and pirouetted, unfolding her wet wings, stretching them out until they were extended to their full, sweeping width, the feathers still dark with water.

Instinctively Doug joined her, felt himself extending his own wings. He reacted without thinking, shaking the stiffness and moisture from the appendages. His feathers clacked and rattled.

Anvra's hands caught his shoulders where clavicle and scapula came together in the great double-socket that allowed the winged people to use their arms either separately or as a reinforcement to the heavy wing-muscles themselves. Anvra's own wings folded around Doug's, holding them still.

"Kathang," she whispered fiercely, "are you crazy? You know they're bound to have listening devices here."

"All right," he said harshly, but remembering to keep his voice down. "It was just a reflex. I didn't know. I'm not Kathang, remember?"

She stepped back from him, folding her wings. Her large eyes peered uncertainly at him. He settled his own pinions, turned from her and began to walk among the devices filling the floor space.

He stopped before an apparatus consisting of a metal hoop some six feet in diameter, surrounded by strange jewels and odd curlicues. He could swear he had never seen these shapes before—but they blurred as he looked at them, and suddenly they seemed familiar. He stepped forward, feeling his hands lift and begin tracing an ordered pattern in the air.

Anyra was puzzled. "What are you doing?"

He ignored her. His fingers touched the jewels in a quick combination.

Soundlessly and magically, the metal hoop was replaced by a

disk of blinding radiance—a circle he remembered.

He ducked back instinctively.

Through a disk like this one had gone the dark thing that had stolen some essential part of himself. And through such a disk he had come to this place of a winged people.

Behind him, Anvra made a small choked sound.

"Kathang?" she said, softly and almost timidly. Her voice shook. "Do you remember who you are now?"

"I repeat," he said. "I'm not Kathang!"

"But you—" She turned to stare at the glaring radiance. "You activated the Portal. Only a Sorcerer like Kathang, who had worked on it, would know how to do that. If you're a stranger in his body, how did you know?"

"It must have been reflex," he muttered. "Like using the wings. I don't know what I did. I just let my fingers work by themselves."

But she still stood back from him.

He gave up the thought of trying to convince her. He laid his hands on a jewel. The disk of light vanished, leaving the hoop of metal as cold and harmless-looking as before. He walked on among the machines.

He looked ahead, at the room's far wall. His vision blurred, then cleared. He saw a door that pierced the wall, and he approached it. He pushed the door open and stepped through into a dim, smaller room—like the room his blurred vision had seemed to show him when he had looked at this tower from the open room of the Water • Witch's Aerie.

Before Doug were four table-like pieces of furniture. Two were bare. The other two bore the figures he remembered seeing—each a body dead some little time. One body had wings while the other had not.

The one without wings was his former self.

The body was dried and shrunken inside its clothes. The skin of the face was gray-white and fallen in upon the bone beneath it, so that the broken nose and scarred jaw seemed emphasized. The hands were as bloodless and dry as the face. And their knuckles were like massive bony knobs swelling the dry-dead skin.

"So..." said Anvra softly beside him. "It's you. That's what you looked like."

He turned to her, suddenly bitter.

"You're sure it isn't just one of your slaves?" he snapped. "With his wings cut off?"

"A Cadda Noyer slave it would be. Not mine," she answered. "But look at it. That body was never born on this earth."

She turned to the other dead winged figure, the one with wings.

"Kathang," she began, her eyes glowing. She broke off and seized Doug's arm with fingers that dug in. "What's your name—your real name? I can't call you Kathang any more!"

"Doug—" said Doug. There was no point in trying once more to wrestle with the unpronounceability of the rest of it.

"Doug..." she said. "Look at this body.' Look! It's Kathang! The body of Kathang!"

Doug frowned.

"Look at his neck," said Anvra. "Jax said that if you had the fighter's body, Kathang wouldn't have any place to go but back to his own!"

Doug looked. He had not noticed it before because the wings had propped up the head, but the neck itself was at an unnatural angle to the shoulders.

"The Cadda Noyer must have killed him right there at the fights, under cover of the confusion of you running away." Anvra said. "Of course! They couldn't risk leaving him alive. If they had been able to kill you, too, they would have done it right then—to make sure you couldn't talk. Don't you see? That Portal machine back there has to be unregistered with the Magi!"

She broke off, the color suddenly draining out of her face.

"I was wrong," she whispered. "No matter what you know, the Cadda Noyer can't afford to make a deal with you. They've got to hide the fact you ever existed—or be declared outlaws if the Magi find out about the unregistered Portal!"

"What I can't understand," he replied, "is this. With all the knowledge you people have about things like that Portal, nobody but you wants to believe I could be from another world."

"Nothing living ever came through a Portal," she said. "Until you. If the Cadda Noyer have found a way to bring souls from other worlds to ours, no wonder they—"

A BRAZEN voice, amplified beyond the power of any flesh-and-blood throat, rang out in the big room behind them:

"Anura Mons-Borroh!" it thundered. "Anura Mons-Borroh! Leave this aerie immediately by the route you came, and you can go unhindered. Anura Mons-Borroh, leave alone, at once, and leave safely. The elevator and corridor by which you entered will remain clear for you three minutes more..."

"I won't leave alone," Anvra shouted at the walls. "I'm a contract-mate. I'm self-obligated. The Water Witches will call you to account for any harm you do me."

"You have trespassed on territory of the Cadda Noyer," roared the walls. "The Water Witches have no authority here."

The voice stopped abrouptly as if the power source activating it had been interrupted.

"Quick," gasped Anvra to Doug. She ran back into the large room and Doug followed her. They twisted and dodged at a run through the maze of equipment and reached the small room where the elevator waited—just as the elevator doors opened. Standing within the box of the elevator, facing out, were three winged men.

Doug stopped at the sight of them, then took a menacing step forward.

"No," screamed Anvra, catching at his arm with both her hands. "They've got interferers."

Doug saw that each of the three held something like a black cone six inches long and perhaps four in diameter at the base.

While one stayed back in the elevator, holding his weapon on them, the two other Cadda Noyer walked out. Methodically they proceeded to tie up both Doug and Anvra, binding each in rope so that their wings were held in folded position. Doug also found his hands clumsily but effectively roped tightly against his sides.

"All right. Into the elevator," said the Cadda Noyer holding the weapon.

The ride up was longer than Doug had expected. When the doors opened, he understood why. They had reached a large room with one open side. Looking out, Doug could see that they were now high in the tower, the city spread out below them.

"Release the woman," said a voice.

Doug turned. The speaker was standing behind a long table. Seat-

ed on either side of him were two other winged men in Cadda Noyer livery. There was a darkness of age to their still-unlined faces, and the long primary feathers of their wings were gray-brown.

"And rack those interferers," added the standing Cadda Noyer, as the last coil of rope fell from Anvra. "Do you want it said we held a Sister of the Water Witches at weapon-point?"

"Are you trying to pretend that isn't just what they did?" blazed Anyra.

"Mistress," said the standing official behind the desk, "the Cadda Noyer has no quarrel with the Water Witches." He turned and gestured toward the open side of the room. "The sky is yours. Why don't you leave us now to our business?"

"Because it's my business, too," said Anvra. She had her temper back under control and spoke coldly. "I'm self-obligated."

"To a man who gambled his body away to the Cadda Noyer?" said the winged man. "There's nothing for you to obligate yourself to. Kathang duLein is legally dead."

"As you said," answered Anvra quickly, "Kathang's legally dead. I chose this man to take Kathang's place as my contract-mate. My self-obligation lives."

The smile vanished from the lean face behind the table.

"Remarry a legally dead man? Don't talk like a fool, mistress!"

"I so declare it. Who's the fool now?"

"You, woman!" exploded the Cadda Noyer. "Do you think this is some little trespass that we'll overlook for fear of offending another Aerie? If you declare yourself contract-bound to this man and your self-obligation leads you to interfere, we can kill you, too. There'll be no question of criminality to be raised against us by the Magi. All your Brotherhood can do is sue for damages. And even if we have to pay those, it won't matter. We're not a poor Aerie now."

Doug's vision blurred, briefly. A curious feeling of understanding woke in him.

"Now," he said.

The single emphasized word turned every eye toward him. For some moments there was a curious silence in the room.

"Now?" echoed the Cadda Nover official softly.

"I think you must know what I mean," said Doug.

"Yes," said the Cadda Noyer, stroking his chin with a narrow forefinger. "I'm afraid I do. You're a fool, too. You could have died quickly. But you've made it necessary for us to know all you know before we set you free of life. There's a madness in you and the woman both."

He turned back to Anvra.

"Mistress," he said, "think before you answer me—for your own sake. Do you know what this man is talking about?"

Anvra was staring at Doug.

"No," she said. "But if I did, don't think I'd be afraid to admit it."

"Then you don't know," said the official with relief. "Good. The Cadda Noyer have their secrets, mistress. But bravery and pride is as honored among us as among your own Water Witches. I'm glad we can save you from yourself, after all."

 ${f H}$ E turned to the three who had captured Doug and Anvra.

"Two of you take the Mistress Water Witch into the air, away from the tower, and hold her until I've shut the wall. Then let her go."

"No!" cried Anvra as a pair of winged men approached. Her wings were half-spread and cupped.

"Don't touch her," Doug said softly, "or you'll regret it."

The two who had been closing in on Anvra stopped, confused.

"Anvra," said Doug, "pay no attention to what I'll be doing. Get one of those weapons. Now. Don't ask questions."

For a fraction of a second, Anvra hesitated. Then she spun toward the wall where the three interferers had been pushed into slots.

The three guards lunged for her. Doug took two quick steps after them, stopped and half turned, balancing on his left foot with his body tilted over to the opposite side. His knee drew up to his chest like a spring—and lashed out.

His lightly shod foot, flat soled, thudded into the spine of one of the guards. There was an ugly crack. The guard dropped and lay still.

Doug staggered, off balance with the effort and the untrained muscles of his body. He managed to get his kicking foot down on the floor and kept himself upright. He kicked again, this time toe-up in conventional fashion. The point of his shoe drove into the neck of the closest of the other guards. The man flipped backward to crash, wings half-spread, on his back. His hands were at his damaged throat as he fought for breath.

The remaining guard drove hard into Doug in a kind of a high tackle. They both went to the floor.

"Stop!" It was Anvra's voice, high-pitched and fierce. But Doug drove a knee hard into the winged man's middle. The Cadda Noyer grunted. His grip relaxed and he rolled away. Doug jumped to his feet

A black cone in her hand, Anvra was covering the three winged men behind the desk. The guard with the crushed throat was still fighting for air. The one who had tackled Doug was struggling up.

"Don't move," Anvra said tensely to the men of the Cadda Nover. Covering them with her weapon, she walked to Doug. Her free hand went to work on the ropes that bound him. When they fell away, he flexed his released arms and stretched his wings.

She turned and plunged out into the air. The guard now on his feet hurled himself courageously at Doug, wings partly extended and cupped to strike. Instead of retreating, Doug stepped forward inside those wings and struck a quick, short blow at the other's face with the cast enclosing his broken hand. The man dropped.

"Stand still," shouted the voice of Anvra from empty air behind him. He saw that the three Cadda Noyer behind the desk had moved to attack him, but her words froze them. Anvra was hovering with spread wings upon a warm current of air fountaining up the side of the tower.

"Doug," she shouted. "Come on!"

He looked out and down at the dizzying depth of air separating him from the ground. Furiously he took his instinctive fear in hand and flung it aside. He jumped blindly out into the unsupporting space.

IV

HE had just time for one flash of panic as the wall of the tower flashed up past him. Then, with a wrenching muscle effort and a boom of suddenly trapped air, his wings opened. All at once he was wing-spread and soaring, circling out and up.

Anvra was only a little higher than he, wings moving in what seemed to Doug to be camera-work slow-motion, beating up and away from the Cadda Noyer tower.

He tried to follow her, and the flight reflexes of his body responded. He found that both his arms were extended. His cast-enclosed right hand fitted its wingbone-niche awkwardly but it adequately locked itself in among the underfeathers of his right wing. His left hand was no problem. Arm and wing muscles were moving together in great, slow, heavy wingbeats that rowed him upward into the air.

He had always thought of birdflight as something effortless—but this was not. Against the great area of his wings the air pressed with a mass that felt as heavy as water. He lifted himself with each double down-stroke of his pinions as if he were laboriously rowing a boat.

He felt the breeze of his movement cold on his face and neck. He was sweating. He looked back and down. Behind him and far below, four figures in the clown-colors of the Cadda Noyer were circling upward. He turned his eyes forward again to search for Anvra.

She was high above him. She had stopped beating her wings and was now soaring, circling higher and farther away from him by the second. He struggled to lift himself faster—and then he felt the updraft Anvra had already caught.

Suddenly his body seemed weightless. He turned reflexively into the updraft, circling higher and higher—and all at once the glory of being airborne was upon him.

S MALL movements of his wingtips directed him, tilting him into the rising column of air. He was in full effortless sail across the sky—falling upward, gracefully and effortlessly upward.

"Doug," called Anvra.

She was waiting for him to join her. But he could not let go of the ecstasy of riding the updraft.

"Doug!" Her voice rang in his ears. She had coasted nearer. A second later she flashed upward from below him, turning to face him as they all but collided.

"This isn't the time to get soar-drunk," she said. "The Cadda Noyer are gaining."

He looked down. The parti-colored figures were still a good distance below them but climbing rapidly. A cold shock of common sense cleared from him the emotional transport of flight.

"Where to?"

"Home," she said. "My Aerie. If you're not Kathang, then you have to be a Brotherless man, entitled to unlimited sanctuary with the Water Witches as my contract-mate."

He looked ahead and down at the distant, foreshortened tower of the Water Witches' Aerie for which they were headed. The scene blurred. Far and away through smoke-like layers of double images, he saw a room in which stood a tall winged man, an old man, clad entirely in black. The distortion vanished from his vision. He saw the scene below, again sharp and clear. Decision firmed in him.

"That's no good," he called to Anvra. "I can't just sit there, locked up forever. Let's go find those Magi you talk about. Let's tell them the story."

"No," she called back over her shoulder: "There's no Brother-hood to speak up for you. You'll never convince the Magi on your own. I won't take you to them."

He gazed at her sailing beside him and a little ahead on the long downward slant. Below, the scene blurred momentarily. Again he glimpsed the old Magus he had seen after he had beaten the two Cadda Noyer bullies in the plaza.

"Then I'll find them by myself," he said.

He tilted away from her, aiming himself toward the closest tower he saw along their flightpath.

"Doug..." her voice was a wail behind him how. "That's an Aerie of the Numerologists. All right. Wait! I'll take you to the Magi. But they won't believe. They won't!"

He followed her toward a tower some miles off. They flew hard for several minutes. Then he glanced back over the wind-combed feathers of his stiffly extended left wing. The four figures in Cadda Noyer livery were gaining faster now that Anvra had altered course. But from the fund of instinctive flight knowledge in this body Doug wore came an instant calculation. The Cadda Noyer were gaining, but he and Anvra should reach their objective before the pursuers could catch up.

Soon the tower they sought rose close below. They fell rapidly

toward a small circular area on the tower roof. Several black-clad figures were peering up at them. Suddenly he and Anvra were landing in the protected circle.

Rather, Anvra was landing. Lulled by the easiness of instinctive flight, he had forgotten that his flying abilities were only reflexes. Wings thrashing, he sailed into Anvra and into several of the waiting black-clad figures, who tried to duck out of his path but were too late.

He felt a collision of bodies and the back of his head slammed against something cruelly hard. And that was all he knew for the moment.

HE opened his eyes to see faces gazing down at him. Anvra's was concerned. But the other faces—all of males in black or Cadda Noyer-colored clothing—were either blank with astonishment, or set with anger.

Climbing to his feet, Doug looked around him. There was a dull throbbing in his head. His wings felt bruised and heavy.

"Magi?" he asked, gazing at the black-clad men.

"—Who else serve the Brotherhoods?" answered one, a thin and elderly man with a pinched, frowning face.

"Sirs, I told you, just now!" broke in Anvra urgently. "He can't know that you're Magi. He doesn't even know how to use his wings. Didn't you see how he landed?"

The thin man's frown became a scowl.

"To chambers," he said, and swung about on his heel.

An elevator took them down to a room somewhat larger but otherwise resembling the room in the Cadda Noyer tower from which they had escaped.

There was even a similar if unoccupied table at one end of the room. Doug shut his eyes, trying to will his headache out of consciousness. It faded, but would not go away completely.

The thin Magus who had answered Doug walked behind the table. He sat down, passed his hand across the bare surface directly in front of him, then stood up. Instantly a silence and a quiet shuffling of position took place in the room.

Doug found himself and Anvra, with a black-clad Magus beside

her, standing before the table. The Cadda Nover official was standing beside another Magus a little to Doug's left.

"Well?" demanded the thin Magus behind the table. Obviously he was a man of authority.

"Elector, sir," said the Cadda Noyer official, "our Brotherhood has already entered a claim to the body of this individual. He belongs to us."

The Magus now had his head cocked on one side, listening to murmured sounds that seemed to come from the table top. The sounds were completely audible to Doug's ear, but they made no sense. It was as if they were words in some foreign tongue.

When the murmurs ceased, the Elector raised his head.

"I see," he said to the Cadda Noyer. "We also have a report of the individual in this body defending himself so well against two of your bullies that he disabled both of them without leaving the ground. A hearing was set on the rights of that encounter. Because of your claim, the hearing has been put off until two days from now."

"Why a hearing?" demanded the Cadda Noyer. "Kathang duLein gambled his body to us and lost—"

"There's no question that the body is yours," interrupted the Elector.

"Then what is at issue?"

"The question concerns the body right of the soul of Kathang duLein. I assume the Cadda Noyer are planning on dispossessing the duLein soul and replacing it with the first Cadda Noyer soul that needs a new body?"

"Yes," said the Cadda Noyer. "Why not?"

"Because a question of inherent justice concerns itself here," said the Magus dryly. "You may be entitled to the body, but not to the right of dispossessing the soul currently inhabiting it. The evidence seems to show that the body was considered lost at the time duLein was transferred to it—and that it survives now only because of his efforts."

The Cadda Noyer stared.

"Even if so-" he said. "What of it?"

"Kathang duLein may be entitled to lifetime tenancy of the body," said the Magus, "in which case, you could take possession of it,

and put it to use—say, as a wingless slave. But you would not be entitled to give the body for use by another identity."

"That's ridiculous—" The Cadda Noyer began, then changed his tune. "What are the alternatives?" His voice was strained.

"If you don't deny—and if evidence appears at the hearing to show the Cadda Noyer guilty of any criminality against the associated Brotherhood Aeries—then the punishment can be no greater than a fine on the Cadda Noyer and their surrender of responsible members, such as yourself, for slavery or execution."

"And if we deny—and evidence of criminality appears?"

"Then the Cadda Noyer must be declared outlaw, its members unprotected from death at the hands of any lawful individual, and its Aeries shall be cast down and destroyed."

The Cadda Nover official stiffened.

"Self-obligation gives me no choice," he said. "I must put my Brotherhood first. We shall accept the hearing."

"Very well," said the Elector. "In two days, then."

He turned toward the Magus standing with Doug.

"Lock up this individual—" he began, pointing at Doug. But Doug spoke before the sentence could be finished.

"I'm not Kathang duLein," he said.

"Quiet," said the Magus. "You've got no voice in this matter. Take him—"

Doug felt something hard jammed against his right side.

"I repeat," said Doug steadily, ignoring the weapon and staring back at the Magus behind the desk. "I am not Kathang duLein."

"He's insane," said the Cadda Noyer swiftly.

"No," snapped Anvra.

The Magus turned to look squarely at her for the first time.

"What do you know of this, mistress?" he asked.

"I was Kathang's contract-mate," said Anvra hastily. "This man is not Kathang."

"Sir," blurted the Cadda Noyer, "the woman has nothing to do with the case—"

"Be quiet," said the Elector without turning his head. To Anvra he said, "If this man—this identity—isn't your contract-mate, what interest have you in him?"

"Oh, he is my contract-mate-I mean, he's my new contract-

mate, now that Kathang's dead. Sir," Anvra pleaded, "I've seen proof he's not Kathang duLein. Let me speak."

"If you're now the contract-mate of the identity within the body of this man," the Elector said slowly, "you must know there's a question to be asked before any testimony from you can be heard. Tell me, mistress, is your self-obligation to this identity such that you'd lie to the Magi in order to protect him?"

Anvra hesitated. For a moment she gazed at the Elector eye to eye. Then her fierce stare wavered. "Yes," she whispered.

"Mistress," said the Elector, "I honor you for your sense of selfobligation. But I refuse to consider any testimony of yours. Remove this individual as ordered—"

"I am not," Doug said clearly, "Kathang duLein."

The Elector turned and stared at Doug.

"You keep repeating that," he said at last, "as if it were a statement that ought to have some meaning for me. Actually, it has no meaning at all. Why do you think I should pay attention to it?"

"Because," answered Doug, looking steadily at the Elector, "if there's the slightest chance that I'm not Kathang duLein, you must stop and wonder what others in your Aeries and Brotherhoods also might not be who you suppose they are."

The Elector stood up.

"I'll have to think about that," he said, half to himself. He nodded at the other Magi. "Take him away."

This time Doug let himself be herded out of the room into the elevator. They dropped a long distance to a narrow corridor leading to a room that had no open side and felt as if it were deep within the lightless earth.

S OME hours later the door opened. The same thin Magus came in, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Doug got to his feet from the bed on which he had been lying. They faced each other.

"Tell me," said the Elector abruptly. "If I offered you the chance to prove you aren't Kathang duLein, how would you do it?"

"Anvra Mons-Borroh knows the proof as well as I do."

"Her testimony is worthless."

"All right," said Doug. "Let me take you to the underground

section of the Cadda Noyer Aerie, near here. I'll show you-"

"I have no authority to enter the Aerie of another Brotherhood without invitation."

Doug took a deep breath and tried his only remaining hope.

"Do you know what a Portal is?"

Thoughtfully the Elector touched the top of his narrow chin with one frail forefinger. "I know."

"When I speak up at this hearing—"

"You aren't going to speak up." The dark eyes in the narrow face of the winged man were dispassionate but closely watching Doug. "As you certainly should be aware, by Kathang's own doing there's no Brotherhood to speak for you."

"Can't I speak for myself?"

"Again, you should be aware that you can't. This is a civil case concerning the right of dispossession a soul inhabiting a body owned by the Cadda Noyer. You have no more voice in the Hearing than some inanimate object of value claimed by two different individuals."

"I see," said Doug. "All right, I can't testify. But I'll be questioned?"

"If necessary—to provide information not otherwise available."

"Then I want someone there who can explain how those Portals work. Say, one of my ex-Brothers in the Sorcerers' Aerie—preferably the Aerie Master, Jax du Horrel. Can you order that?"

"I can't order," said the Elector. "I can ask if any wish to attend, and perhaps the Aerie Master, if not others as well, will do so."

The Elector turned and left abruptly, closing the door behind him.

After that Doug went through another timeless period of waiting, punctuated only by the occasional arrival of food. When at last the door suddenly opened again, he guessed that at least two full days had passed.

TWO people walked in. One was a Sorcerer—Etam duRel, the lean, blurred, dark man who had been Kathang's friend. The other was Anvra.

"Doug--" She stepped quickly to him ahead of duRel and half

lifted her wings as if to sweep them around him. But the space of the room was too small. She dropped her feathers and stood back, looking at him yearningly. "Your hearing takes place in just a few minutes. I brought Etam to see you."

Her eyes seemed to be trying to deliver some message. He gazed back at her searchingly. There was both love and anguish in her gaze.

She sighed. "I can't stay," she said. "I'll see you at the hearing, Doug."

She left. The door closed behind her.

"Listen now, Kathang," said Etam, rather gently, and Doug turned back to the winged man. "What I have to say will not please you. There's but one way to save your life and keep you from the Cadda Noyer. You'll have to risk the loss of your wings and your freedom. It's your only chance."

Doug blinked. Before his eyes the blur that was Etam shifted and almost resolved itself, becoming a simple double-image. There was the dark face and short figure of Etam haloed by the ghost of a larger shape with two good wings and lighter-colored hair.

"What does Anvra think?" Doug asked.

Etam made a deprecating gesture with his left hand.

"Well," he said, "she believes in self-obligation the way dying men believe in reincarnation. I did tell her that I was going to urge you to plead insanity."

"Insanity!"

Etam smiled sadly.

"It would be a fair enough plea, old friend," he said. "You really are insane, you know. This whole belief of yours about the Damned World is a fantasy I watched you build, bit by bit, as we worked on the Portal. You've even got Mistress Anvra half-convinced your fantasy is true. That's why she wants you to let me help you—to save your life. And at the same time, that's why she doesn't want you to take my help. Because she thinks you'd be pretending insanity only to save your life—the worst sort of cowardice and breaking of self-obligation."

"I see," said Doug. "But if I really am insane, it's all right?"

"If you're insane..." Etam shrugged. "It's not a matter of right or wrong. How can an insane man understand self-obligation?"

"How about you?" demanded Doug. "How does your self-obligation face up to helping me with something like this?"

"I've got as much sense of self-obligation as any other man. My family..." He broke off, relaxing. "Of course, this violates my self-obligation to the Magi—even to the Sorcerers. Never mind that. Are you willing?"

"To say I'm insane?"

"Not just to say it. That's what I let Mistress Anvra think I was going to suggest. But you'll have to do more than that. You'll have to demonstrate that you're insane."

He reached into a pocket under the yellow lozenge on his red tunic, pulled out a triangular sliver of metal six inches long and about two wide at the base. He handed it to Doug.

"Hide this up your sleeve," Etam said. "And before the hearing gets really under way, try to escape. When you make your break, head for me. Slash me with that blade I just gave you."

"Slash you!" Doug frowned.

"That's important," snapped Etam. "Just an attempt to escape will not convince them you're insane. But if you harm me—your Brother and friend—"

"They will want to know where I got the blade."

"After you slash me, I'll grab you. During the struggle, you'll drop the knife over the side of the tower. The Magi will never find it—and they won't worry about it, because the fact of your insanity will be self-evident."

"I see," said Doug.

He took the blade. A greenish stain tinged the point. As he looked away from it, the double-image effect that held the man before him seemed to expand to affect the whole room. The walls became as transparent as thin gray smoke. Doug stared out...and out...into a white vastness where the Walker's dark shadow lurked.

Then abruptly the room was again solid about him. Carefully he slid the knife up under the tight silver sleeve of the garment Anvra had given him.

"Good," said Etam, dark eyes watching Doug out of the doubleimage. "As a lunatic, you'll have to lose your wings. But I'll do my best in testifying to sway the Magi into making the rest of it just confinement rather than slavery. Courage, old friend!" He gripped Doug's bulging double shoulder-joints firmly with his hands, then departed.

ONLY a few minutes passed before two black-clad Magi came for Doug. They led him to an elevator and rose with him to a large three-sided chamber. The fourth side was open to the elements.

Doug saw that the time was late afternoon. The weather was now nippingly chill. A cold wind blew freely into this tower room from its open side. But no one present seemed to notice. Beyond, the sky was cloudless and ice-bright. The sun slanted in at an angle that lit only the edge of the open side and left the rest of the room, by contrast, in deep shadow.

In this shadow, five of the Magi waited behind a massive table. Only the middle one—the thin Elector—was standing. Each of the five had a black scarf bound tightly around his head.

Along the wall opposite the open side of the room were other black-clad Magi but without the head scarves. Near the open side stood the clown-suited Cadda Noyer official Doug remembered and two others wearing the same livery. There also sat the small silver-suited figure of Anvra. Etam duRel lounged beside Jax duHorrel, both wearing the red livery and yellow lozenge of the Sorcerers.

The two Magi guards had Doug stand before the center of the table. The Elector's cold face briefly examined him, then turned to the others.

"Nye duBohn, you were a witnessing Magus at the professional fight on which Kathang duLein wagered his life?"

A young-looking Magus moved to stand almost beside Doug.

"I was," his tenor voice rang reedily. "The Magi in Hearing may be sure I am aware of the rules. No transfer of soul from one body to another is permitted without a license issued by the Magi, and without Magus present to witness and record the transfer."

"It was all in order?"

"As I recorded it. I examined the individual this Kathang du-Lein, before the fight started and I was satisfied with his freely made contract. I remained with him until the spell was east. And I sensed his soul depart for the body of the downed fighter."

"And afterward?" The voice of the Elector was toneless.

"My attention was caught by the surprising survival and escape of the supposedly beaten fighter. When I finally turned back to the body of Kathang duLein, it had already ceased breathing."

"You examined the body?"

"I felt under the right armpit. There was no pulse."

"May we have," said the Elector, looking along the wall, "the second member of the Magi to have been involved with the identity of Kathang duLein."

"But he wasn't--" began Doug.

"The identity at issue will remain silent," said the Elector.

A BLACK-CLAD figure detached itself from the wall and walked toward Doug. Doug recognized the old man who had peered down at him after the fight near the catapult. In his slow bass voice, this witness gave his account of being called to the scene by bystanders. He had found the two Cadda Noyer conquered and Doug unconscious.

"Were you surprised to learn that the individual had defeated two bullies wearing wooden spurs?" asked the Elector.

"The individual was dressed and spurred as a professional fighter," answered the witnessing Magus. "It was only when I was composing my report later that something struck me as odd. Why should an untrained entity, even in a trained body, win such an encounter?"

"I note here," said the Elector, examining what to Doug seemed the bare tabletop, "your mention of that oddity in your report, together with a recommendation for investigation."

"I did so recommend," said the old Magus.

"And the Cadda Noyer rejected investigation," said the Elector. "I see. You may stand back."

There was a faint cough from the open side of the room. Glancing over, Doug saw that Etam had stepped back between the Magus on one side of him and Jax on the other, so that his double-imaged face was hidden from all but Doug. Sharply, Etam jerked his head in a signal to Doug to act.

The sound of the Elector's voice brought Doug's eyes back to the

table. The Cadda Noyer official was stepping forward.

"We have already submitted our claim to the Magi," the Cadda Noyer said. "Together with a list of pertinent documents, such as the original request for permission to transfer the entity of Kathang duLein—a request made by Kathang duLein, himself, as is customary. But to review our position..."

The Cadda Nover spoke on. Once more Doug's eyes wandered to the blurred face of Etam. The man jerked his head again in imperative signal. His dark forehead gleamed slightly in the late sunlight. Before the table, the Cadda Noyer was elaborating on the claim of his Aerie to the body Doug inhabited.

"...The Magi," he concluded, "cannot deny the Cadda Noyer use of a body which belongs to them."

"That remains for this Hearing to determine," coldly responded the Elector. "It is a fighter-slave body, with which the Cadda Noyer may ordinarily do as they will. But what is in doubt is the right of the Cadda Noyer to evict its current resident soul."

"Kathang duLein gave up any right to his life when he bet and lost it on the fight," cried the Cadda Noyer official.

"But the fighter—the body of the fighter he bet on—did not lose the fight," said the Elector impassively. "Therefore Kathang did not lose, either."

"Having already submitted freely to the spell, he had abandoned his body-right and life-right. Technically, from that moment on he was a dead man."

"He is a dead man!" cried Anvra desperately from the sidelines. "I saw his dead body, myself. Kathang duLein isn't in the live body at this Hearing. Kathang is dead!"

"Alive," growled the Cadda Noyer official. "But legally dead."

"Silence!" The Elector paused. Then he turned slightly, and for the first time his eyes met Doug's.

"Alive?" asked the Magus. "Or dead?"

"The Cadda Noyer," Doug answered slowly, "honestly believe that Kathang is alive in this body I wear. Mistress Anvra Mons-Borroh honestly believes him dead. Both are wrong."

DOUG took one step back from the desk and turned so that he could see clearly past the figure of the Cadda Noyer official.

"One man knows the truth," said Doug. "One man other than myself."

He turned back to the table. Reaching into his sleeve he drew forth the knife, tossed it to the polished surface.

"I was given this by a visitor to my cell," he said. "I believe that the tip is poisoned—so that even the smallest scratch would kill."

The Elector and his flanking Magi stared at the knife. They did not touch it. The Elector raised his gaze but sat without a word, as if waiting for something to happen.

Doug and everyone else in the room now were watching Jax and Etam.

Out of the blur of superimposed faces, Etam's dark forehead seemed to shine strangely. Doug attributed that to the beads of sweat he could see on the Sorcerer's brow.

Doug spoke up loudly in the silent room.

"The one who came to me," he said, "knew I was not Kathang, that I was from the Damned World. So he didn't think I would understand the concept of self-obligation. But I do. I know that while some persons may lose their self-obligation entirely, there are others who never completely lose it, no matter how they try. In the end—"

Etam exploded into movement. His left elbow jerked back into the midriff of the guard beside him. He snatched the black cone from the guard's belt.

"Stop!" he shouted, waving the weapon threateningly.

Doug took one step toward him. "I'll take that gun," he said.

"Stand back." The voice from the small, dark blurred figure with its one crippled wing was high and cracking. Etam turned and shouted at them all, "I cheated my Acrie. I lied to my Brotherhood. But I will not dishonor the name of duLein. For I am Kathang! Kathang duLein! The man from the Damned World tells the truth."

With a choking sound, he threw the weapon to the floor and flung himself over the room's open edge into emptiness.

Doug hurled himself between the bodies of Jax duHorrel and the guard, stopped at the edge to gaze down. Below he saw Kathang-Etam spinning with one wing outstretched, falling without any effort to save himself. "This Hearing will resume," said the Elector tonelessly.

Doug was suddenly aware of Anvra standing beside him at the open side of the room. They both stared downward at the distant dark slit of a street in which the body of Etam duRel had disappeared from sight.

"He did well at the last, though," she whispered to Doug. "He made his end a good one..."

"It now becomes necessary," the ranking Elector was saying coldly, "to inquire more fully into the situation."

His steady eyes swung to the Cadda Noyer official, who had taken up a position beside Jax duHorrel. The Cadda Noyer's face had gone pale.

"The Cadda Noyer," he said, "in self-obligation, consider that their Brotherhood may be responsible for an indiscretion by some of its members. We are prepared to admit that there now seems a possibility that the man whose body has just died—Etam duRel—may have approached some of our Brotherhood with a scheme to build an unregistered Portal to the Damned World."

"For what purpose?" asked the Elector.

The Cadda Noyer hesitated. His face regained color, hardened.

"I am no Sorcerer," he said. He glanced at Jax duHorrel. "Perhaps the Aerie Master would be willing to venture a theoretical explanation..."

"Not I," said Jax. "The Brotherhood of Sorcerers has been doubly shamed here today." He looked at Doug. "Also we owe gratitude to this being from the Damned World." He added in a different tone, "Sir, what do we call you rightly?"

"Doug," said Doug. "Or Doug duDamned World, if you prefer."

"Perhaps," said Jax, "you would like to be the one to explain what Etam and Kathang were up to."

"Only Etam—originally," said Doug, and glanced at the Cadda Nover official.

"Sir," said the Cadda Noyer swiftly, "we also owe you gratitude. We offer you whatever recompense is judged proper."

The thin face of the Elector changed slightly, as if a smile were struggling to emerge.

"Then it seems beyond our duty to demand further explanation

in this case," he said. "So if all parties are satisfied and provided guarantees are made. . ."

He glanced from Doug to the Cadda Noyer.

"The Magi," said the Cadda Noyer official stiffly, "have the word of the Cadda Noyer, upon their self-obligation as a Brother-hood Aerie, that any illegal machinery on their premises shall be destroyed."

"Then this Hearing is dissolved," said the Elector.

The room immediately began to empty. The Cadda Noyer official and his companions were already launching themselves into the air, away from the tower.

V

DOUG found himself standing with Anvra at his side, facing Jax duHorrel and the gaunt Elector.

"Doug duDamned," said the Magus, "unofficially, we would be grateful to hear your further explanation of this matter."

Doug nodded. "Sure. But tell me something first. I gather a Magus can sense when an exchange of souls between a couple of bodies is taking place, even if afterward there's no way to detect the change. But can he sense whether more than one pair are exchanging if all the exchanges take place at the same moment?"

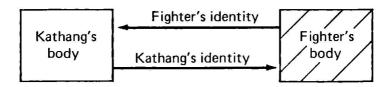
"Why..." The Elector hesitated. Then he frowned. "No!"

"That's what I thought," said Doug. "You see, Etam set up a portal system for the Cadda Noyer so that while a legal transfer was going on, an illegal transfer could let a third party shift to another body undetected. The explanation is a little complicated. Have you got something I can write on?"

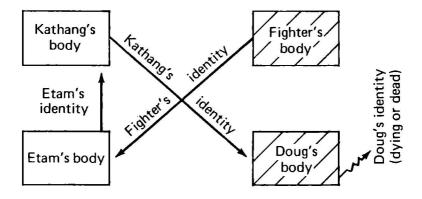
The Elector touched the table behind him. A drawer opened to reveal something like a classroom pointer, two feet long, narrowing from a butt perhaps an inch thick to a pencil-like tip. He picked it up and traced with the tip on the table surface. Where the tip passed, a glowing yellow line appeared.

He reversed the pointer and passed the butt end over the line, erasing it. Then he passed the pointer to Doug.

"Thanks." Doug stepped to the table. "Look. This is the transfer as it was legally planned to be, between Kathang and the fighter."



"The crossed-out box," he said, "represents a body scheduled to be dead shortly after exchange is accomplished. Now, on that pattern Etam planned to superimpose secretly the illegal transfer of two other identities, of which one was to be a dying man—dying, so that he could be brought body and all through the Portal. And Etam himself was to be the other. Etam had already discovered on my world a place where a man would be dying at the required instant. He set up a transfer pattern timed to coincide with the legal transfer between Kathang and the fighter, like this..."



"But you've got Kathang marked to end up in a dead body," protested Jax. "He wouldn't have agreed to that if he were in the plot with Etam!"

"Kathang was not in the plot. All he knew until the moment of his transfer was that Etam had been stealing equipment parts from the Sorcerers' laboratory. He said nothing about it because he considered Etam his friend. Actually, Etam was afraid that sooner or later Kathang would realize that Etam had built an illegal Portal. The fight must have been rigged, too. Etam wouldn't want to gamble his whole scheme on the chance Kathang's fighter might win."

"But Kathang ended up in Etam's body, not the other way around," said Anvra.

Doug smiled briefly at her.

"Yes," he said. "But it wasn't until Kathang found himself in the room under the Cadda Noyer tower with the illegal Portal that he figured out what had happened. Seeing a chance to escape all the troubles he had brought on himself as Kathang, he decided to sit tight in Etam's body and say nothing. He knew there was no way now to prove he wasn't Etam."

"But the fighter, alive in Etam's body—" began Jax.

"Etam must have had plans to dispose of him, too," said Doug. "Plans the Cadda Noyer must have agreed to, privately. There must have been a lot at stake. I assume there were certain individuals to whom they could have sold illegal body transfers for a good price."

"Shamefully, yes," said the Elector. "Such people exist in every generation—in spite of all watchfulness."

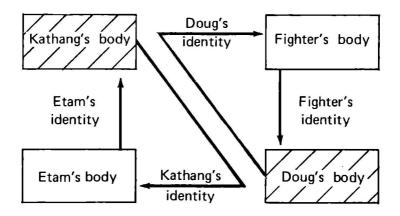
"Anyway," put in Jax, eying Doug curiously, "it didn't work out the way Etam planned it. Why not?"

"Because of me," said Doug. "You see, I wasn't really dying when Etam pulled me through the Portal. For certain special reasons I was being poisoned by gas—but I'd taken measures to save myself. This brought me close enough to death for Etam to pull me into this world—but by the time he had transferred my identity into the body of the fighter, I was already reviving. That's what tangled things up."

He pointed to the second pattern he had drawn on the table.

"I was supposed to transfer identities with Kathang," said Doug. "And Kathang's identity, finding himself in my dying body, would have no choice but to die also. Meanwhile, Etam's healthy soul would have no trouble ousting my dying one from Kathang's body. The fighter's soul, leaving his own dying body behind, would find Etam's healthy body open for occupancy. That was the plan. But here's what actually happened."

He drew a third pattern on the table:



"You see, by the time my reviving soul reached Kathang's body, it was already stronger than Kathang's," Doug said. "Consequently, I ousted him. But I occupied his body just in time to hear the spell for Kathang to change bodies with the fighter. The fighter's soul had already left his body—so I ended up there, instead."

He paused, looking in turn into each of the three faces watching him.

"You know the rest of it," he went on. "I won the fight and the body survived. The Cadda Noyer attendants, seeing the fighter still alive, apparently thought the whole scheme had misfired. They broke Kathang's neck under cover of the general confusion—to keep him from testifying to what had been tried. But by that time Etam had already occupied Kathang's body. So it was Etam who died.

"Meanwhile Kathang, ousted by the spell and my own stronger identity, moved instinctively into the nearest healthy but unoccupied body. That was Etam's body, back in the Cadda Noyer underground lab. Evidently Kathang occupied it just before the fighter tried to, and the fighter, dispossessed, was left with no place else to go but my own original body—now actually and irreversibly dying from shock and identity-abandonment. Instinctively he entered my dying body, and died with it."

"But how could you know it was Kathang in Etam's body?" demanded Jax. "And what made you so sure he'd admit it?"

"I relied on his sense of self-obligation," Doug told the big Aerie Master. "It almost drove him to admit who he was earlier, after he saw me in his body in Anvra's Aerie. Then, just before the hearing, he tried to trick me into killing him so that his shame would be buried with him. I knew then his self-obligation could be made to drive him to acknowledge his name."

"You knew? Sir—" Jax checked his verbal explosion. "No offense—but what does someone from the Damned World know about self-obligation?"

"As it happens," said Doug wryly, "it's not unknown where I come from." He smiled to himself. "Actually, it was just Etam's bad luck that he imported someone with it—a maverick like myself."

"Mav-er-kkk. . ." Jax's tongue stumbled over the unfamiliar sounds.

"That's close enough," said Doug. "It's from the Damned World's language—a word meaning someone without the ownership mark all his herd-fellows wear burned into their bodies. Every society has a few mavericks—even yours. You can tell us by our habits, if you know what to look for. For one thing, we refuse to live by the herd rules, so we're forced to make up our own rules instead."

"But we're talking about self-obligation," Jax said.

"That is self-obligation," Doug replied. He shook his head as the Aerie Master opened his mouth protestingly. "Never mind, I know you can't see it yet. You're as blinded by your society as my people are by theirs back on the Damned World. It's as if my people were all blind in the right eye, and you folks here all blind in the left. They see only the virtues that exist in the social mass. You see only the ones existing in the individual."

"Sir," said the Elector, "without the safeguards to individual freedom embodied in the Brotherhoods and the Magi, all but a handful of men would enslave the rest."

"No they wouldn't," said Doug. "But you won't believe that until you see it for yourself. That's why I'm going to go back and open up communication between my people and yours. They need to see that to make a society work, the individual doesn't have to be swaddled in protection from birth to the grave.

"Doug—" the word came from Anvra's throat like a catching of breath. He turned and smiled at her.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to stay on the Damned World. How can I? I inhabit one of your bodies and my old one is a ruin. But I've got a responsibility—"

"Responsibility to whom? Those wingless, crawling slaves back there?" demanded Jax.

"To them and you, too," said Doug. "I'm the only one in both societies with what amounts to full vision. Even physically, two eyes see more than one, you know. They allow binocular vision—depth perception. I can see things you can't even begin to imagine—like the advantages to both worlds in getting to know each other—"

"Doug duDamned," said the Elector, "I'm not sure we could approve this."

"Maybe not—but can you stop me?" Doug laughed. "I didn't set up the rules of this society of yours—you people did. Does anyone in your whole civilization have the right to stop me from doing what I want?"

"Stop you?" echoed Jax. "We won't stop you—we just won't help you. You need a Portal to get back to your own planet. Also a poison and an antidote that works on your present body the way whatever you took on the Damned World worked on your old body."

THE room shadowed about Doug for a moment. For a moment again, as when Etam-Kathang had been living, Doug seemed to see through the walls around him as if they were made of smoke—out and out until his vision ranged into the whiteness among the planes of eternity.

"You don't understand at all, do you?" He focused down to the three of them watching him, and the walls became solid once more. "No, Jax duHorrel," he said gently. "I don't need a Portal or any special help—any more. I told you I can see things none of you will be able to see until you acquire this new perception of mine. For example, you asked me how I knew Kathang was in Etam's body. Well, I saw him there—first as a blur and then, just before the Hearing, as a recognizable double-image. And just as I

can see now how to get back to the Damned World—even taking this body along with me—by an effort of mind alone."

"You!" Jax choked on the words he had been going to say, took a deep breath and made an effort to lower his voice. "You don't understand what's involved in what you're talking about! Do you think your plane's just the other side of some magic space, four inches thick within the ring of a Portal? It's not just inches thick, that Portal. Its other surface is dimensions and qualities away, on the world of its destination—there are elements to the equation that change value second by second."

Doug laughed. "It doesn't matter."

"Nonsense. Utter nonsense," snapped Jax.

"No, not nonsense," said Doug, sobering. What he had seen during that terrible momentless moment of distanceless passage through the planes of interdimensional space formed again in his mind's eye. "There's something else I didn't tell you. You all assumed Etam brought my body and soul here together. He didn't. Maybe it was because of the drugs in me, but my identity was left behind. It could have stayed behind and died an easy death. But some instinct in me wouldn't let it."

Jax stared at him.

"From the moment my identity entered interdimensional space, my new vision began to operate," said Doug. "What I saw then seemed all blurred and out of focus. But I've since had time—and maybe help—to strengthen it and bring it into focus. The last confusion ended when I saw Etam Kathang an hour ago. I remember—and I understand now. There are many, many roads between the planes, and all of them are roads I can travel."

Jax stared at him, unconvinced. "You'll still need help."

"And maybe I'll get that, too," Doug said, smiling at Anvra.

"Love will not be enough," muttered Jax.

But Doug was looking outward, beyond the Magus and the Sorcerer and the Water Witch, beyond the room—and beyond what the others could see. He was staring at a dimensionless brightness through which a dark thing strode. And as he looked, it turned toward him.

The Walker lifted a lumpish arm. And this time, the hand beck-oned.

Last Night and Every Night

JAMES TIPTREE, Jr.

Girls are so easy to fool and fuddle. It's a wonder that more of them aren't led to their doom by the likes of Chick!

HE was not unimaginative. As he waited for the cow to come out, he could appreciate the dark slash he made in the pool of streetlight, the sleek pale highlight of his hair. Night, rain, empty city street, background traffic drone—like an old flick. What was keeping the cow?

She came out then, hesitating at the lobby entrance of the expensive apartment building. A fool, a cow, he thought. Staring around, touching things. He gave a quick glance left and right. No one. He threw his cigarette away and started toward her across the wet street.

She was very young, he saw now, and small. Shorter than he. And what the hell was she wearing, some kind of nightdress? He slowed down as he neared her. Easy. This was so easy. How many had he done? A hundred? A thousand, more like. Bring 'em in smiling. A professional, he was.

She lifted her head to stare at him. Big stupid wet eyes, short upper lip, pointy little pimples under the thin dress. Chicken meat. Anna ought to put out at least fifteen for this one.

He had his special face on. Boyish, uncertain. Let her look deep into his blue eyes under that sincere hair. He did not even have to pay attention to what he said or what she said. The same old curd. Trying to hold back at first, trying to put him down—and then sniveling it all out, plop, plop. Like, evicted. Like, you too? Like they threw her out. Like, no one would speak to her. Like, where are we going?

They were walking along beside the silent buildings now, he making the right noises at intervals and wondering idly how Anna and Honky always knew. Servants probably, he decided. Places like these have lots of servants. It was time for the pitch.

"Look," he said. "You've got to get someplace indoors. It's all right for me, but you—" He gestured at her damp dress.

"My purse," she whispered at her empty hands. What a cow.

"These friends," he said. "Good people," he said.

"Oh, like this?" she said. "I couldn't..."

He had stopped paying attention again, letting it drone on. Night, rain in the empty street. Background traffic hum. Why was it always so empty? The cow had fallen silent, goggling at him. He made himself pat at her soft little arm. She flinched.

Anger flamed up his neck—although he knew it was his own bad timing. What did she mean, spooking back on him? He looked at her more closely behind his sincere eyes, letting his hand fall empty, pathetic. Maybe I will see you later, cow, he thought. Maybe I'll take the trouble to watch you in Anna's special room with the two-way mirror. I'll be floating and you'll be screaming, cow. Like that Cuban girl...and the others.

The Cuban girl, he thought suddenly. When was that? Something confusing here. My head. He shook it, and saw her looking at his distress, softness oozing at him. The anger licked back at her in a hot silent roar.

"If you really think so," she was saving.

Sick with rage, he said ever so gently, "I'm sure it's all right."

Sure as hell she was no virgin; Anna couldn't bitch, he had a right to something once in a while. So what if one wasn't smiling?

Just don't mark her up. He let their eyes meet in the way cows loved. A smile trembled between them.

"Hel-lo," he murmured softly. Softly his arms came up, not touching her. The street was silent. Gently he braced both hands on the wet stone behind her, trapping her untouched between his arms, letting her melt toward him. Tenderly he smiled his hatred, wondering where he would strike her first. The knee first, yes, and then the dress, and...and...he shifted his weight slightly, the girl smell thick in his nostrils. Her lips brushed his, a soft warm tremble, and he—

—Found himself jumping under a hail of water on his back, deafened by a tirescream. He whirled, confused, cursing, slapping his legs, hearing the cow's gasping giggles. The car—where in hell had it come from?—slowed to park in the next block.

"Come on," he said, grabbing her hand. She spooked again. He let go and made himself speak gently.

"You're wet, you have to get indoors."

His anger was splintered now; it wouldn't hold him up. Get on with it. Wearily he formed his boyish grin, feeling it wrench his cheekbones.

"And you're shivering," she said and suddenly took his arm. He let her. Which way was Ann's? There. They sloshed on.

"Is it far?"

"No."

What the hell was wrong with him? Mechanically, he made himself picture her in Anna's room, mechanically he said something that made her smile. At last they turned between the big gates into the private drive.

"Here? Your friends?"

"That's right," he told her, feathering his knuckles on the chimes. She was gasping around at the portico. Honky opened up.

"Even'n, Mistuh Chick. Even'n ma'am." Rich warmth of Honky's special voice. "Oh, my! You step right in, ma'am. I'll call Miss Anna."

Still staring, the cow was got inside to drip on the carpets under the twinkling chandelier, to open her mouth at Anna swirling down the broad stairs, to receive the enfolding handelasp that was almost a motherly hug. Behind the two women's backs Honky was giving him the fist. He returned a spitting gesture. The cow was being pathetic and grateful as Anna led her up the stairs.

He knew what was beyond those stairs—the closed doors, the soundproofing. He had been up there a lot. He could go up any time. That was part of the deal.

The cow turned to wave at him.

"I'll be around," he called. Why did they get that look? God, he was sick of that look. The whole damn place looked peculiar, too, just for a minute. Like...was it daylight? He frowned and focused on Anna's retreating figure. Behind her skirt she made a fist and then five fingers, twice.

"Fifteen," he told Honky. "She's smiling."

"You saw the boss," Honky said, peeling off two bills. Then he added a card. "Here. Next."

"Up against the wall, father," he said, looking at the card. It was the other side of town. "It's raining."

"It's always raining. Get your ass over there."

"I think I've got a cold," he said, but he turned and marched out.

THE messenger who had been sitting in a deep armchair beyond the potted palm got up as the door clicked.

"Not much left there," he commented.

"Not much left of any of us," said Honky. He wheeled on the messenger. "Why do you do this to us? Why don't you let us die dead? Stop the game—stop it!"

"Sorry," said the messenger, picking up his raincoat. "You know we're short of personnel. Do you realize more than three hundred people die every night in this city alone? And every last one of them has to be met. You can't leave them milling about on the streets. A lot of them we can take care of with relatives or friends, but what do you do with the orphans and the loners? What do you want, a flipping band of cherubim caroling from door to door?" He struggled into his coat.

"You've made slaves of us. Zombies!" groaned Honky.

"On the contrary," said the messenger, pulling on his rubbers. "We're just letting you go on doing what you did in life. What's

unfair about that? You three were pretty good at dealing in friend-less women, so we're making use of your skills. With certain—ah—necessary modifications, of course. If it's any comfort to you, these bits of your personalities won't hold together too long, you know. Chick, now. I'll have to be finding a replacement for him soon, I fear. He wasn't much to begin with. But it all helps, it all helps. Anna's fairly intact so far—so are you." He started for the door.

Honky grabbed his shoulder.

- "Let us go," he pleaded. "Let us die!"
- "Sorry," said the messenger again, shrugging him off.
- "Goddamn vou!"
- "It's not policy," the messenger said. Shining faintly, he went out. $\hfill\Box$

OH SAY, CAN YOU SEE

(Continued from page 38)

the process. The things that must go on inside the human mouth are better not revealed. And she'd done all this deliberately with my spinning-reel money!

Then I noticed an even stranger thing. As she chewed the food, it slowly faded to invisibility.

"How come that stuff—whatever it is—works on what you eat and wear but not on the fork or chair?" I asked. I could see no effect where she was holding one or sitting on the other.

"Pete, don't be dense." She laughed like a child crooning over a new toy. "You can't use *Poof* with clothes. That's why it's so important for my health and all. You take them off first."

"You do what?"

"Pete, stop saying what all the time! Of course I'm not wearing anything. And the food is inside me, so it has to change. It's only what's outside that doesn't disappear." While I tried to follow that, a wisp of cigarette smoke moved away from her chair and toward the living room. "You can just stack the dishes—I'll do them tomorrow. And don't forget the garbage. It's beginning to smell."

You find after marriage that women have garbage on their minds all the time. They're experts at the stuff. A woman can bring two bags weighing ten pounds from the store, put the food away and have six sacks weighing forty pounds left over for garbage. I couldn't believe it myself until I weighed it once. But no woman I know can carry the muck out to the pails where it is stored.

I started out with the bags, then stopped as I heard Brewster taking his garbage out. And suddenly I realized what he must have guarded there on the other seat and what he had carried off the train. It didn't seem to have quite driven him nuts, but I figured he needed privacy for a while, so I waited until he was finished. I had a lot of thinking to fill up the time.

Ш

THE fact that Lucy was really invisible was just beginning to hit me. She could be right beside me at any minute and I would never know until she made some kind of noise. There are a number of times when a man needs to be alone—nothing wrong, but private times. Everybody needs privacy. But with an invisible woman around, how could I be sure of anything? And if this went on long enough...

Then I realized that I had no idea of how long it would last—or whether it was permanent.

"Lucy!"

"Umm." The mutter came from the couch, where a tangled mess indicated she was reading my evening paper. She had never learned to leave any newspaper in readable condition after she finished with it. From the way it was suspended, I could guess that she was peering over it, annoyed at having me say anything when she was reading—though she never seemed to worry about talking to me when I was reading. I called to her again, and this time the paper dropped further. "All right, all right. What is it, Pete?"

"Lu, do you still have the instructions for that stuff?"

I heard her sigh, and the paper dropped to the floor. Then there were sounds from the bathroom and a piece of paper and a little plastic jar floated into the room. The sheet of paper was crumpled from being thrown away, but at least she had not burned it. Women never believed that instructions were printed to be read and saved.

The packaging was amateur work, not up to the type of treatment stores expect. I looked it over with a professional eye. A hum-

drum plastic container of the kind cheap import houses can furnish, the design and label lacked personality, put across no message by their appearance. On the back, the weight of the contents was given and a list of ingredients in chemical jargon or Latin, along with the name and address of Wizard Cosmetics. On the front there was only the name: *Poof*!

There was no attempt to reinforce the desirability of the product or stress its superiority. The instructions took up only one short paragraph: Remove clothes, spread thinly over body and wait one minute. Effective until counteragent is used. Discontinue if dizziness or unusual euphoria occur. And remember, with Poof you're really gone!"

That too-obvious slogan was the only sales plug I could find. Yet this stuff was selling for a small fortune by word-of-mouth, thanks to a few demonstrations in the women's clubs. The idea was staggering. Success by such methods could set back the advertising business a hundred years.

Lucy made a sympathetic noise. "I tried to find how it worked, but the man wouldn't say. He just called it modern magic. But I've been thinking how it might work, Pete. It must contain some kind of virus that affects the body. Maybe it was developed as an improvement on X-rays but then released to the public because of the apathy of vested professional interests. It's good for your health, because this way you can give your whole body the benefits of the sun and fresh air. Anyhow, it works on anything organic within the body. It has to be a very filterable virus to get into bones and give the flesh the same index of refraction as air. In the presence of strong emotions, the man told us, its power diminishes, but—"

"Okay, okay," I cut in. She can do that kind of thing. After she sees some science show on television, she can go on for hours. She used to fool me, before we got married, just as she must have fooled her science teachers in school. "So how does it work?"

"I told you. It's a virus. It tries to hide, and when it's in me, it has to hide me, too. I guess you could call it a terribly shy virus."

"Then how come the gunk in the jar isn't invisible? It looks like a kind of greenish face cream to me. Why doesn't it hide itself there?" Getting no answer. I went on to a more important detail. "Where's the counteragent?"

She sighed. "I didn't have enough money, Pete. The counteragent costs as much as the cream. Look, if you really don't like me this way, you can get the other stuff tomorrow. The address is only a block from your office."

"And you're going to run around naked until then?"

Her voice was indignant. "I'm not naked. Nobody can see me."

Typical female logic. It worried me. Some of the men in our business got their start selling things door to door when they were young. I remembered some of the stories about what women were willing to do when they thought a man would never see them again. With this stuff, anyone coming to the door would never see Lucy in the first place. What would she be willing to do?

I had not meant to bring up any of that aloud. But then it all came rushing out. And a lot of other things, some of them going back to the time before we were married. So Lucy had to come up with some choice bits as seen from her side—most of them only half-true, of course, but able to hurt just the same.

That's when I found out that being visible is no good when fighting an invisible person. She could watch every twitch when she got a good hit across, but I had only a floating voice for a target.

She was starting to cry by then, and the pattern was getting ready for stage two—threatening to go back to her mother. She actually did go back once the first year we were married, but both she and her mother rejoined me two days later.

I still had the jar in my hand, though I had almost thrown it at a wall a couple of times. Now I forced myself to calm down a little. I unscrewed the lid and looked inside.

"Okay, Lu," I told her. "Sauce for the goose is sausage for the gander. Go ahead and run around like that. But right after my shower, I'm going to start rubbing this stuff all over me. Then I can go running around like you and your friend Helen Brewster." I grinned. "And nobody will see me do anything wrong, so I won't really be doing wrong. Right?"

She stopped crying. There followed almost two minutes of dead silence. Then I felt her hand on my arm. Next, her body against mine. Pretty soon I could feel her hand running through such hair as I had.

Then she jerked back. "Pete! Your hair!"

I got to a mirror in two jumps, Lucy still in my arms.

It was not very long yet, but it was long enough to show that the darned cowlick I'd lost was on the way back. And the color was my normal muddy brown. Not a trace of green.

It was funny. Lucy could not keep her hands off my new fuzz. I could not keep my hands off her invisible body.

IV

In the morning I rode in with Brewster. He muttered some kind of apology for his behavior the day before. He was in pretty bad shape. I was worried that some perverse female logic might motivate Lucy in her condition; Brewster knew for sure that perverse logic would drive Helen. And we both feared they would get together, doubling the perversity. The ways of two women are a lot more slippery than any single woman—or any single married woman—can work out.

We were not sure what we would find at the agency. But the answer came in the elevator going up. There was just one other man there, so far as I could see. Then I felt a hand, and a woman's voice giggled. Brewster turned bright red and stepped back hastily as the door opened at our floor. The hall carpet had little pinging dents in it leading to our section.

Some wife, I decided, had followed her husband here and was going to be hard to locate in the maze of copy desks and equipment. Some wife? It could be Lucy! She could have slipped out the front door and ridden in with me all the way. And the giggle—well, except when they do it in a certain sexy way for effect, most women giggle a lot more alike than they talk. A giggle's a giggle to me. I know Brewster was sure it was Helen, though I could have told him that she never...Well, let's skip that.

The whole agency was infected. We could tell by the faces as soon as we walked in. Helen had spread the word, and it seemed her woman's club and her friends had scored a first—though other groups would be pretty sure to follow. Two of the married men had ugly black eyes—the kind a woman can bestow when the man can't see what she's up to. And almost all the other guys showed signs.

So Poof was no secret any more. The bachelors seemed to find

its use funny at first—until young McGinley came in, looking as if he had been dragged through two knotholes.

He finally admitted enough to sober up the other bachelors. "How would you like to go out with a girl and find out too late she was her mother? They both sound alike, damn it. And now Mama won't let me near her daughter and the girl wants to scratch my eyes out!"

Brewster had shown amazing sense. He had a sample of *Poof* and the counteragent, and he got on the phone to one of our big chemical accounts to get it analyzed. That reminded me I had to contact Dr. Aracelsus.

The phone rang at his end and was picked up, but nobody spoke into it. All I could hear were rumbling sounds and something that sounded like far-off screaming. Then a tape cut in and took my message. Though I made it pretty urgent, nothing had come of it by lunchtime.

I called home and got a busy signal. The second time the phone rang and rang, with no answer. Of course, Lucy could have slipped over to see Helen. I did not call Brewster's house. I feared I would get no answer there and be sure of what I did not want to be sure of...

The women who had come to work—about a third were reported out sick—formed a sort of chain and swept through the offices, trying to get rid of the sources of a lot of sudden little breezes and occasional giggles. Our gals admitted they might have missed one or two of the invisible visitors.

Then the chemistry report was phoned in to Brewster. Seemed that *Poof* had a regular vanishing cream base.

"Then he gave me a lot of words I couldn't get. Things resembling aconite, verbena, digitalis..." Brewster sighed. "I figured maybe we could get the FDA on 'em. But the chemist says they're all in tiny traces, totally harmless in that concentration. And that list of ingredients gives the names for all of them."

"And the counteragent?"

"Water—just plain water." Brewster's eyes tightened. "The expert says the stuff used in the jar reads like some of the old recipes witches were supposed to use on themselves. So he suggests maybe the counteragent is holy water! Big laugh. Now what do we do?"

I tried to reach Aracelsus again, and this time he answered. He

was a little stiff about my troubles until I mentioned the chemists' report. Then he laughed. "Caught. He's absolutely correct. It's the old formula, accelerated and buffered by modern scientific means and a few touches of my own. And the counteragent is the—well, it's an equivalent of holy water. No trouble fixing your wife up with the counteragent—since she's not Jewish."

"Wait a minute," I told him. "She is Jewish—half Jewish on her mother's side."

"But her application form...umm..." The line went quiet. "Did she and Mrs. Helen Brewster apply together? All right, you don't know, but do you think so? Umm. They must have signed them and then switched them somehow before filling them out. Bad. Very bad. That puts your wife under the sign of the Twins. And you don't have children. I don't suppose she's expecting? No. Ummmm." He was silent again, while screaming sounds came from the background. "Well, no sense sending you the counteragent. It wouldn't work for her. She should have had a special formula of Poof. And the rest—well, time will tell."

"But how do I get her out of it?" I yelled at him.

"Gently, Mr. Phillips. This isn't my fault, you know. Like all magic, mine depends to some extent on the recipient. If you can get her to want very strongly to become visible, she will. She can throw off the spell herself, if she tries hard enough. Anyone can. And in time, her efforts could remove it completely. She's your wife, though, Mr. Phillips. So you'll have to figure out the way to make her want out."

Slamming down the phone, I sat staring at it and rubbing my palms and fingers. They must have been itching for quite a while, but now the annoyance was strong enough to be really noticed. Something in *Hair Today*, maybe, since I'd done a lot of fooling with my new crop and the stuff might have rubbed off on my hands. But while I scratched, I was also doing the hardest thinking of my life.

Finally I called Helen Brewster.

"Must be telepathy," she blurted, on hearing my voice. "I was just about to ring you. As I told Henry, that darned counteragent won't work on me. Something about my not being Jewish, for heaven's sake! And you had better get home, Pete. Lucy is acting

strangely. She keeps running around the room singing something about flying. And I caught her playing hobby horse or something the last time I was over to your place. And..."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I assured her. Then I asked a lot of questions.

When it comes to style, price, size and the like, Helen Brewster is a genuine genius. I had my information in a couple of minutes.

THE agency handles the account of a reputable furrier, and our staff can get discounts there. So I knew where to go. I hustled out of the office, not even stopping to nod to Brewster.

Sure enough, the place had a coat that met all the specifications. They quoted an honest price and assured me any alterations that Lucy might want could be made later. They were even nice about arranging payments on time over a three-year period, since they knew me. It meant getting by on the same car for a good while and not getting the new bedroom furniture we wanted. But I figured this was an emergency.

I caught an early train. I was feeling hopeful and optimistic, though my hands had begun to itch again.

And I was lucky at the station. One of the neighborhood boys had his Jaguar there to show off to some girl, and he was just leaving. He gave me and my bundle a lift home.

The door was not locked. I shoved it open softly and walked in. I took the box out of its wraps and the coat was snatched out of my hands and draped across shoulders I could not see. Two arms were around me and I was being pulled down and forward, while a hand was doing things to my shoulders that...

"Very pretty!" Lucy's taut voice said.

And the invisible woman in my arms let out a shriek that could only come from Helen Brewster.

"So you send me out of my house to yours. I'm to let your husband know about your troubles before he sees you. And meantime, you and my husband are locked together. And you!" Lucy meant me, of course. A woman can only use that tone to a husband. "You and that naked hussy!" She was practically strangling. "You can't buy me a stole for my birthday, but you can buy her a mink coat—and not just any mink, but that one. Mink! I've heard about minks

and what they do. But I never thought I'd see it here in my very own house!"

And then I began to see Lucy. Helen shrieked again, and I don't know what I did. Lucy was only a dimly outlined figure, one arm not visible at all. But what I could see was a brilliant, glowing red at the top, shading to a deep green below!

Our reactions must have reached through her anger, because she darted for the mirror just before it all began to fade. But for a minute or so, the effects had been fantastic. Then she was invisible again.

HELEN let go vocally, talking a mile a minute. She tried to explain how she had known about the coat I was buying Lucy and how—to make the surprise complete—she had wanted to get Lucy away until it was all ready for her. And how she was just overcome by how beautifully I had chosen, and was just hugging me out of enthusiasm. And so on. It was mostly true, except for a couple of details she left out and which Lucy could not know about.

When Helen was finished, Lucy surprised me by sounding almost natural, though a little dull, as if drained of emotions.

"It's a beautiful coat. I guess it all makes sense, and I'm sorry I blew up," she said. She picked up the coat and then put it back down on the sofa. "Why did you buy it, Pete?"

So I told her. I was beginning to relax, figuring everything was going to be all right. I'd been married for more than five years but I still could forget that wives are just women, after all.

She came over and kissed me. "It's a beautiful coat, and I'm happy that you think that much of me, Pete. I'm going to love it next winter. But..."

"Put it on," I suggested.

"No, I couldn't." There was no more anger or hurt in her voice, but she was firm about it. "I can't even look at it now, honey. Every time I see it or touch it, all I can see is you hugging another girl!"

"But..."

"Lucy, I know just how you feel," Helen Brewster said quickly. "I'll put it away in my closet until you're ready for it."

So a small fortune of coat went across to the other house.

Lucy was being nice, but I had a feeling that she was forcing herself. She cooked dinner. We tried to eat it while I explained about the counteragent. She consented to try willing herself visible, that did not work. And I scrubbed and scratched at my hands and watched the moon come up through what we called our picture window. It was a fine moon.

At last Lucy sighed for the fiftieth time. "We might as well go to bed, Pete," she said. Her voice was tense, though she kept it soft. "We can think about this tomorrow."

I nodded, though I had done my thinking already and drawn a blank. My idea had been sound, yet it had backfired. I turned in, feeling prickles in my fingers and a strange chill up my back. For a while, Lucy and I tried cuddling together, but we got nowhere. I guess neither of us felt particularly outgoing at the time.

Soon she began to make faint snoring sounds. She never admitted that she could snore, of course. Women are too delicate for that. But I've heard a fair number of men sleeping, and only about half of them snore, while every single husband I've talked to claims his wife does. I've suspected sometimes that Lucy knows she does snore and that she even pretends to snore when she wants me to think her asleep. I wasn't sure that night whether she was faking or not. So I turned over and did a little heavy breathing, too. Something was irritating me and I could not sleep. Maybe it was the long sliver of moonlight that crept into the room.

Considerable time passed before Lucy slipped out of bed. I did not intend to follow her, certainly. But in a few moments I heard strange sounds coming from the dining room.

When I slipped through the shadowed doorway there, the moon was making the room almost day-bright. Lucy was humming. But what caught my attention was a heavy old-fashioned broom. Apparently she was using it as a hobby horse.

It was going around and around the table, bristle end up. Once in a while it would lift a bit, as if she were leaping. But there was no falling sound as her feet came down. Then the broom went up, midway to the ceiling—and it did not come down at all.

I felt my hackles rising. Crouching, I stepped out into the moonlight. My hands had stopped itching, but I dropped them to the cool floor and just squatted, looking at the broom go around and around the room.

"I'm flying," Lucy sang out. There was triumph and wildness in her voice. "Pete, I'm flying!"

I said nothing.

"What are you doing down there, Pete?"

I did not know exactly. I was just doing whatever felt best. I was relaxing for the first time since I had heard about *Poof*. And the long hair over my forehead swayed from side to side, tangling in the eyebrow hair over my nose, while with my eyes I followed her flight around the room.

Then the broom straightened and headed for the side door, bumping against it demandingly. "Let me out, Pete," she begged.

I scrambled back to my hind legs, feeling awkward and uncertain. My hands reached for the doorknob. Clumsily, only with much difficulty, I managed to twist it open. Beyond lay the screen door, but that proved less of a problem.

Lucy dropped the broom almost to the ground in the backyard. I could see the grass bend in the moonlight where her feet touched. Dew from the grass was collecting on her legs, and sometimes they seemed visible to the knee.

I felt hot and sticky, though the night was cool enough. I dropped into the dew, burying my hands and face in it.

"I can fly," Lucy sang out again. And the broom rose. It rose steeply, climbing over the roof, then headed south beyond the hedge—toward the moon.

I shuddered. But the rich smell of the grass and the small living things in it made a symphony in my nose. Suddenly I took off on my four limbs. I cleared the hedge at a bound and was after her, howling back at all the dogs that had begun to bark.

V

THE whole of suburbia lay before us, open to our escapade. The thought intoxicated me.

But abruptly a harsh roaring filled the air. I stopped, shaking my head, and I could see Lucy descending. I mean that—she was fully visible now on the broomstick bringing her down.

The roaring ceased, and a figure emerged from the shadow of the hedge. Aracelsus! He had been swinging something around and around, and now he tucked it into his pocket. Frowning, he studied us as we went toward him.

When I was close, his fingers traced a design in the air while he whispered incomprehensible words. Then he was holding something that smelled of ammonia before me. "Change back!" he ordered. "And you, Mrs. Phillips, you'd better get some clothes on. I rather enjoy this, but the neighbors might be shocked—"

Flesh seemed to rip inside me, and the wonderful smells blurred and disappeared. I jumped up. On my two feet, I followed Aracelsus and Lucy through the hedge and back into our house. There, while Lucy put on a dress, he drew the drapes over the window and turned on the lights.

When Lucy returned he motioned toward the Silex. She filled three cups with coffee left over from dinner. I was tired now, but beginning to realize some of what had happened to us. I would never have thought it possible!

"So you turned her into a witch and me into a werewolf!" I glared at Aracelsus. "And that makes you a genuine magician, I suppose."

"Only a student, though those degrees of mine are quite genuine. But I didn't turn you into a werewolf, Mr. Phillips. Where are your parents from, by the way?"

"Indiana"

"Grandparents?"

"From the Balkans," I told him. "They changed their name to something that sounded more American. But there were no werewolves in my family."

"That you know of. It's a recessive tendency, anyway, and real werewolves have always been scarce. It takes just the right polarized light from the moon and something to alter the growth cycle of the cells—several weeds or viruses can do that. In your case, my hair restorer did it, of course. But you had to have an inborn tendency."

He turned to Lucy.

"I'm afraid you are more my fault, Mrs. Phillips. A Gemini, without child. Blond hair. Blue eyes. Danish father and English-

Jewish mother. Yes, that's a combination improved unguents could hardly fail to metamorphose."

He sipped his coffee, as if waiting for us to say something. I had a lot of things to say, but I decided to hold my tongue. I had a feeling I'd been operating on too many misconceptions for too many years.

"Never enough knowledge," Aracelsus said at last. "That's why the best of the old magicians never really attained what they were after. And when they began to see science working, they grew despondent and tried to conceal the knowledge they had. They hid it well, too, though I've reconstructed most of it. But it still depends on luck and the will. Too many variables. I'm going to have to go away. Maybe to the Argentina Pampas. Descendents of the Indians there still keep up the old magic, though of another strain. I won't practice here again until I can handle all the elements."

"And what about us?" Lucy asked. "Are we damned to hell just because of what you did to us? Is Pete going to keep changing his form and am I going to go back to being invisible again?"

"You make your own damnation. Magic never had anything to do with that. But now I know enough about you to teach you to control the changes and the invisibility. You need a little practice, but we'll have time enough for that."

"And then we can go back to being our normal selves?" she

He smiled at her. "If you like." He let his smile deepen. "Yes, if you like."

IT'S not bad down here. There aren't too many luxuries, and the old stone house Aracelsus found out in the wild section is decaying, as it has been doing for perhaps a century since some refugee from his world had it built. But we do well enough. Aracelsus claims he is making progress—enough to set up another student when he hears of one who can carry on after he is too old.

I have not written a word of copy in years now, though I'm thinking about doing a book on the wild life here if I go back to the States. I've learned to know it as no other man could. And Lucy can do the sections on birds and bats.

But I don't know when we will return. Our two boys are still too

young to need civilization, as they call it. And maybe they will turn out to be the students Aracelsus needs.

Motherhood, by the way, does not seem to have affected Lucy's talents. She can still soar like a condor on her reed broom, and she still sings of her flying.

Aracelsus keeps his eye more on me. So far, I haven't earned any more hell here than I did back there. Oh, I claim a sheep from a distant ranch once in a while. And the smell of a young girl when I cross her path makes me drool a bit. But it's the swift run and the scents of the night and the open mind in an open world that I like best.

There's magic in our lives here. To tell the truth, I doubt that we'll ever go back. We like. □

LONG LIVE LORD KOR!

(Continued from page 72)

water into which they avidly plunged their hands to drink from cupped palms. The water flowed in from the mouth of a grotesque head. Niccolae sighed, sat back, water dripping from her chin until she scrubbed it away with the edge of her torn, earth-encrusted robe.

"Having given us water, do you think that the Over Fates might also give food?" She asked as one who might expect any miracle from this time forth.

Her question triggered Kenric's own hunger. It was a long time since he had shared that meal with the Kor-King in the palace of Lanascol. He got to his feet, then stooped to pick up the sphere from where Niccolae had left it on the floor. The dark here was so thick that this small gleam hardily battled it. He could see the bottom steps of the stairs and part of a wall—the rest was hidden. But now that his raging thirst was satisfied, he was aware of something else. An acrid odor. Not born from damp, but separate, coming in strong whiffs as if blown by some breeze.

He hated to leave the water. They could not be sure they would find more in this burrow. And they must now be far under the surface of the desert—but whether headed north, east, south or west, he could not say. When he spoke his thoughts aloud, the girl nodded. She had been ripping at the torn hem of her robe, balling up the tattered strips into a coil. She knotted it around her waist, pulling her skirts up through it to shorten them.

"We have no choice," she commented. "These ways must have been made for some purpose. Therefore ahead must lie another door or arch or exit or something."

Her composure was that of their first meeting, as if she once more had full confidence in herself and their future. Kenric wished he could feel as she did. She held out her hand and he gave her the sphere. With the left wall for a guide they went on.

There was no slope here. The floor ran straight. Nor were the walls carved, though they bore marks as if something passing here many times had rubbed the stone, leaving well-smoothed ribbons halfway between floor and roof.

No grit or dust drifted on the floor. Then, as another wall loomed to their right and they seemed to be entering another passage, Kenric was heartened by something more. Along the base of that wall, cut into the rock, was a runnel in which water ran, perhaps the overflow of the pool from which they had drunk.

Niccolae flashed her light at the ditch and he heard her laugh. "The Over Fates favor us. We have water—at least for now."

But they had something else, too. A strong gust of that acrid air in their faces. Kenric caught her hand, bringing her to a stop as he listened intently. On his wrists and across the backs of his hands the wounds left by the fire worms smarted. He thought of the carvings in the upper passage—of fire worms large enough to carry riders.

No sound—only that scent ever heavier. They went on warily. There was an opening in the wall to their left from which came another stench he knew of old—death and decay waited there. He drew Niccolae closer, as far as he could from that sinister doorway. Then the girl gave an exclamation and broke his grip, reaching for something lying on the floor.

It was a trail of vine, as thick as his forearm, bearing fruit of a paler green, two of which had been crushed to show white pulp. But the other four were intact, if bruised.

Niccolae had the vine. "Salas!" Her voice was as jubilant as if she

had stumbled across the fabled treasure of Xotal. "These are food!"

They plucked the fruit, each as big as Kernic's fist. As he bit into a globe, he was wondering how vines came to be here. Niccolae, having thrust a second fruit into the front of her robe, was chewing on the other. She slipped from his side to stand in the doorway of that stinking place.

Kenric charged after her, only to halt in astonishment as her light revealed what lay beyond. For what little he could see of the area was crammed with wilting and decaying vegetation. More fruited vines were entangled with other material, looking as if they had been continually pressed down by new additions. He could not guess the purpose of such a noisome collection.

"Come!" Niccolae sat the sphere on the floor, plucked at the buckles fastening her outer robe on her shoulders, twitching loose the belt of tatters she had adjusted only a short time before. In a moment the folds of her robe fell about her feet, leaving her standing in a white undergarment.

Hastily she smoothed out the discarded robe and began to plunder the edge of the pile nearest the door, picking out fruit and also what looked like a type of grain, choosing and discarding any too ripe, too bruised. Kenric followed her lead. In the end they had a pack of foodstuffs to be bundled and fastened by her rag cord. Thankfully they withdrew to the clearer air of the passage.

"How do you suppose that got there?" Kenric made the bundle into a carrying pack with a rag sling for his shoulder.

"It's the storage place of a fire worm," she told him. "Their nature is to fill a place underground with vegetation, leaving it to decay and ferment before they eat it. But—"

"The size of this—yes!" He had already noted the significance of that.

None of the small desert worms could have hauled such large vines underground or raised that vast dump. He nursed his hands and knew that they must accept it as almost certain that the worms in these burrows were giant ones. Men had ridden the ones in the carvings, but the carvings were very old. The partnership of man and worm must have ended long ago, since Niccolae had never heard of it. Unless—

"Could we possibly be close to Orm Temple?" he demanded.

"I have been wondering that also. Yet I do not believe we were kidnapped by worm priests. The mind probe—that does not belong to them. They have their own magic."

"They plan to launch a war, according to ZAT. Suppose they produce an army mounted on fire worms—what could Lanascol's men then do? And if the Rovers join with them—".

"Such could overset any force the Kor-King might put in the field," she said. "But with all that at their command, why do they need the prophecy?"

"Perhaps because they believe in it themselves. Tell me, what do you know of the Orm priests?"

"Only what I learned through a planted spy ray feeding data to ZAT. Anything else I have heard reached me second hand. I understand that for generations their hierarchy has not stirred from the temple, only the lowest class of the order venturing abroad. Even those hold themselves aloof from the common people, dealing solely with the Kor-King and his high officers. From time to time the priests send messages summoning some noble—or the king—to the temple to be informed of a new prophecy. The Kor-Kings have usually gone. There are tales of two who refused and were thereafter maltreated by fortune. But any connection between the priests themselves and the subsequent disasters could not be proven. They have never before summoned the present king. I have heard that even what ZAT has learned is little more—"

"You said they have secrets and protections—"

"Yes. One of the Kor-Kings who defied them disappeared after he took a force to storm the temple. Only a few stragglers of his rear guard returned, all in a state of shock. That story is two hundred planet years old—but there are elements in it which suggest that perhaps the priests did have the giant fire worms then."

"So after that, strict response was made to any summons from the priests," Kenric commented. "Yes, such an object lesson would have an effect. However, here we have proof of one thing. A lot of this vegetation is fresh. So the one who stored it here has access to the outer world, and not a desert one either."

"The sooner we find that access the better." She was kilting up the skirt of her underdress. "Let us go."

The promise of a way out, plus food, heartened them so that they

kept to a faster pace. They passed a second door in the wall, this one with a worse stench than the first, suggesting greater rot within. Then the tunnel split in two. Since both ways looked alike and appeared to run in the same general direction, there was little choice between them.

They took the left way, counting paces as they went, planning to return if, at the end of two hundred, they saw no suggestion of an exit. Kenric was ridden by the need for haste. He kept remembering that trail or vine and thought that the harvester might return with another burden. To meet one of the giant worms here might mean quick disaster.

The walls ran smooth. There was no encouraging upward curve. But in the light of the sphere, another doorway loomed. And no stench emerged from it.

With caution they crept through into a dim glow of light from far above their heads. Above them towered a ledge, and on it sat a high-backed armed chair cut from a solid block of stone. On the arms, light glinted. There were metal bands and another band on the back.

Before them, below the ledge, stretched an open space. Equidistant around it were openings of tunnels like the one through which they had come. But they heard no sound, saw no sign that anything moved in those ways.

Seeing that chair ready and waiting for an enforced occupant, Kenric's briefing awoke. This was the place where the oracle was left, manacled to the chair above, while he received the prophecy.

IV

"KENRIC!"

Hands trying to hold him prisoner. This was like waking from a dream. He was at the wall, trying to climb to the waiting chair, while the girl clung stubbornly to anchor him below. He kicked out to break her hold. Then the power of the briefing broke. He loosed his clutch on the projecting hand holds and fell, taking her with him.

"I should be up there!" He was afraid to look up again lest the chair once more pull him.

"No." Her clutch was fierce. "You are not the oracle. You are Lord Kor Kenric—that you must remember!"

"But the briefing—"

"Yes." Her whisper had the power of a shout. "I know. You are conditioned to sit above. However, the sending failed. You must play out the game as another piece altogether. But this much is true—we are no longer lost under the desert. We're in Orm Temple. Maybe we can find a way of escape."

She was right, and she had pulled him out of the mental haze now. He was not the oracle. Also it was true that they seemed to have reached a defined point of compass.

He heard a cracked laugh from the girl.

"Escape—yes—if fire worms can fly! This is the most secret part of Orm Temple, best guarded of all. Suppose we do go aloft into ways known to your briefing, and come upon the oracle himself. What chances then?"

"Transfer for me, maybe." By some amazing stroke of fortune he had come within a handsbreadth of where he should have been at the beginning of this send. And if he could transfer, then the mission was not an abort. The thought of that gave him new energy and once more he studied the wall.

"Very well." Her voice was as low and harsh as it had been in the desert. "But until you do find him, you must take care to remain fully Kenric. Otherwise you will be easy meat for any guard."

His arm caught about her waist and he drew her with him to one of the tunnel mouths. He had heard something moving toward them. They flattened back to wait.

She had put away the sphere, leaving them in the dark. But the faint gray light of the place was enough to make visible the creature padding out into the open.

Fire worm indeed, but a giant—just as they had speculated! The small desert worms had been merely grotesque; this was a monster. Yet according to the wall carvings, men had ridden such.

Niccolae's nails cut into his flesh in her excitement but she was silent, caution curbing her. On the back of the thing was strapped a wide seat or saddle, too roomy for a single rider, Kenric judged. Fastened to one of the peaked fore-ends of that seat were reins, the other ends of which disappeared into the creature's beard of tent-

acles, those working as if trying to rid themselves of the reins' restraint.

The worm came entirely out of the tunnel, halted in the open space. Its three eyes glowed dully. If it sighted the two fugitives it gave no sign of interest. Rather it stood as if in meditation, only the working tentacles, from which spun threads of slime, showing that it was alive.

As it remained so quiescent, Kenric moved out, trying to see its accounterments the better. There was a scabbard fastened to the fore of the saddle where it would swing close to hand for a rider. A scabbard that carried a burden.

Kenric drew a sharp breath. For what he saw could not possibly exist in this time and place. Identities could be exchanged via sendings. Back at HQ now his body—or rather Creed Trapnell's—was encased in a protective device to keep it living against his return. But here he was the man who wore—if one could term it that—another's covering of flesh and bone.

Yet in that scabbard was a weapon known in his own time—a blazer. Objects could not be transported. But neither could a blazer be made here. To manufacture such required a series of highly technical operations. They could not have set up such a factory, which would require transportation of a whole crew of techs.

The mind probe had been alien—at least on an unknown band. Suppose another Service were operating here—one that had developed parallel to his own but had made the breakthrough for transporting without the need for substitution? The test might be whether that blazer were exactly like the weapon he knew. He wanted to get his hands on it to make sure.

This fire worm had been ridden—but dare he approach it? He had hesitated too long. In his head a pain, he clapped his hands over his ears instinctively though he had heard no sound.

The fire worm raised its head, turned to face the tunnel from which it had come. Then it padded back into that opening.

"Did you see what was in that scabbard?" Niccolae demanded.

"It looked like a blazer-"

"Except none could be sent. And neither can such be made by any smith of Vallek. Perhaps we are wrong in thinking only of sending—what if that was brought by an off-world ship? Four thousandfive thousand years—" He was going to add "ago," except that he was in the past now himself.

"Our kind did not pioneer deep space," Niccolae reminded him. "There are many traces of those before us. We are very young as species are reckoned among the stars."

That was true—but a blazer! He must find out if it had come from parallel technology. A breakthrough for a direct send—that information would be worth more to the Service than anything else he could learn on Vallek. He had to get his hands on that weapon. Niccolae's thoughts must have run with his as she said:

"The beast was summoned by an ultra-sonic call—one we could feel if not hear. We can follow—"

He nodded. "I felt it."

Again she laughed. "Do you know what the worm priests do to any female found in their domain? If not, bring your worst imaginings to the fore of your mind and study them. I would far rather die by my own choice than live for the priests, I assure you. And we may already have triggered a protective device leading their guards here."

"I thought they dared not come to the oracle's seat."

"That's only legend. The worm priests put about what they wish outsiders to know. Who is it teaches the oracle here what he must intone as a prophecy? A fire worm? No, the priests know these ways well."

So they went together after the fire worm. The part of Creed Trapnell that was Kenric walked softly, his hands opening and closing, longing for the feel of a weapon. As a trained fighting man he felt naked lacking that. And his nose told him that trouble lay ahead, for the acrid odor of the worms was thick.

Under their feet the floor began to climb on easy grades and far ahead showed what could only be daylight. So they were again approaching the surface of the ground. They walked slowly, close to the wall, listening—

The chill of the underways receded also. At last they came to the end of the tunnel to look out.

Into empty space. And they had to stare down before they saw the trap that way ended in—for truly it was a trap. Projecting from the walls, both on their side of the narrow valley and the opposite one, were stakes supporting a metal mesh. This ran completely around an earth-walled pocket into which opened a number of the tunnels—and it was plainly intended to keep fire worms from climbing out.

At the far end of the pocket was a platform on which lay a tangled mass of vegetation that might have been tossed from the top of the cliff. Several of the fire worms were busied there, collecting loads with their mouth tentacles, carrying the stuff back into tunnels.

Apart from these were other worms, larger, wearing a thicker growth of black hair. And each wore a saddle; so Kenric could not be sure which one they had trailed here.

"Below—" Niccolae wispered in his ear.

She was right. Immediately below them was one of the riding monsters. It had squatted low, its plated belly resting on the ground. Whether it was the right one, Kenric could not be sure. But it did carry a weapon at saddle bow.

He slipped the sling of the food bag from his shoulder. The creature's head was low, its tentacles curled in a tight knot. Even as he watched, the big head slipped lower. Maybe the thing slept.

The stone was rough here, deeply pitted with holes which perhaps the worms used—deep enough to make a rude stairway for human feet and hands. Kenric had to face the cliff during that descent and for all he knew the sleeping worm had roused, could be reaching up for him. He was sweating from more than the exertion of his descent when his boots met the gravel at the cliff foot.

Now he edged around, half expecting to face the worm, wondering if he would have time to catch up a handful of sand to hurl into its three eyes. But the creature lay still. He could see the slow reaction and expansion of its sides as it breathed. With it lying flat like that, he ought to be able to reach the scabbard and ease the blazer out.

But he could hardly believe his good fortune when he did have it free. It was strangely light of weight, unlike familiar weapons. He thrust it in the back of his belt to leave his hands free for the return climb. He joined Niccolae aloft with all the speed he could summon.

In general shape the weapon was indeed like a blazer. It had a

barrel, a stock, two hand grips with one well to the fore, a sighting mechanism. When he tested that he found it to be telescopic to an extent inherent in no arm with which he was familiar.

The material, he decided, must be some lightweight alloy. And very hard. He could not scratch it with the edge of his belt buckle or dent it with a stone. Could it have come from a starship—one roving the galaxy long before his own race had raised eyes speculatively to the moon companying their own world?

"It was made for humanoid use," Niccolae commented.

TRUE. The grip and balance had been designed for one of his own body structure. But that was only a small discovery. He dared not try to fire it, lest he give an alarm. However, with it he now had an answer to one part of his problem.

"Have you ever handled a blazer?"

"Before my sending?" She smiled. "No. I was drilled in some weapons, such as a stunner. But I had no need for the heavier arms. Since I was to be a permanent agent my studies were to fit me as a sorceress. In that calling I do not resort to material weapons. I am supposed to rely on other methods."

"Why," he asked, "did you choose a permanent assignment? — not many women do."

"Didn't they ever warn you that is a question never asked? I have chosen, and until this particular action things have gone well for me." She shrugged. "There are compensations for life on less sophisticated levels. Surely you have had at least one sending where you would have opted to remain when your recall came. That is why they now have a built-in compel-to-end. Before they took that precaution there were exiles by choice. The life of a sorceress in Lanascol is quite enough to satisfy me. Our master, ZAT—though a machine—is careful as to waste. Now—this is no time for such a discussion. You have something in mind?"

"Whether you have had training or not," he returned, a little chilled, "this is a simple weapon. The one button apparently controls the firing of whatever ray is loaded. And the sighting is foolproof sighting. Armed with this you can be safe—"

"While you go hunting the oracle?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Perhaps not, in your own form. But you are dwelling in the form of a man noted for good sense and leadership, and especially for the winning of battles."

"He didn't seem to have much luck in his last one."

"Luck and treachery do not march hand in hand. The Lady Yarakoma knows more about that than is fit—and one could learn a lot if words could be shaken out of her crooked mouth."

Niccolae's vehemence surprised Kenric. She must have read that in his face for she continued:

"I have heard many things of the Lady Yarakoma. And of those I cannot count one good. She is an evil, rotting out the heart of Lanascol—as much a source of trouble for Vallek as the Orm priests, and not so open a one. But now—so you give me this," she gripped the weapon butt, "while you go exploring. Well, this time I shall not deny you. I shall hide near the chair chamber and wait."

They are again before he left her to climb the wall.

"Do you have an idea as to how to go?" she asked as he made ready for the assent.

"I know the chair. Perhaps the briefing will lead me farther. The spy ray they planted was exact enough—before it faded."

"What if the overlay of briefing clouds your wits when you need them?"

"I don't know. But it is all the guide I have. I must try to find the oracle. And if the Kor-King is entited here, there may be some treachery also—"

"Against which one man can serve as guard? Do not forget that earlier King and his vanished army." She seemed occupied by her own gloomy prophecy. There was that in her voice—perhaps because her work was reading the future for clients—which did impress. But Kenric refused to be influenced. With the blazer she could defend herself, and his duty urged him on.

He climbed to the chair ledge. Nor did he look back from that point, for he must put her out of his mind, be single-thoughted from now on. His assignment came first.

The chair was just as his briefing had told him it must be, those metal hoops on arms and back ready to hold a witless creature in place after the priests left him to spend the night here. But the prey did receive a message from somewhere, so potent a one that

it could remain in a brain unable to command a body, could make that body drool understandable words. How was it done? Surely the most careful drilling could not bring a connected phrase, let alone rehetorical prophecies, out of an idiot. What was the trick or secret? Suppose he could find out and be able to defeat it from that direction—if he could not play the oracle?

Cautiously Kenric seated himself in the chair. It was chill wherever it touched his skin. He could not lean back against it nor lay his arms along the arms since the metal hoops were in the way. Were those fastened, the occupant would be caught in a vice, unable to move or turn.

But when he put his head back against the rise of stone Kenric felt a sensation not far removed from that which had struck with the mind probe. He squirmed around, ran his fingertips over the seat back. Thus he was able to trace a square of some substance not visible to the eye. And from it arose a tingling warmth to run up his fingers, his arms, as if he had touched a source of energy. He jerked away—there was something disquieting about that flow.

A man secured as the oracle was must remain, until once more freed, with the back of his head resting firmly against that plate. Was that how it was done? Some form of briefing, potent enough to be imprinted on an idiot's mind. Unless—that was the very point—only the blank mind of an idiot could receive it at all. Just as a sending had to use such to imprint the identity of an agent.

But this oracle had operated for centuries—it was no new arrangement. It could not be the result of a Service traitor's meddling or something from off-world. For if Vallek had been visited by starmen over any length of time some hint of that would exist if only as a rumor. The Service briefing experts had fed all data into ZAT and the computer would speedily have isolated such a momentous bit of information.

Yet there was some form of energy in the chair. Kenric walked around to the back, which was so tall it formed a wall of sorts. Once more he explored the stone. But on this side there was nothing to be felt at all except its natural cold.

At any rate, he had discovered how the prophecies might be set up—but not by whom. And that was the important question. Beyond him now was a doorway, and he knew from his briefing that this was where they entered with the oracle. There was no road now but this. He took it.

The passage beyond was unlit and narrow, the walls smooth. He felt his way through a thickening dusk. Soon he would come to a stair—he slipped each foot ahead a step at a time to feel for the riser. His boot toe rapped and he began to climb, counting as he went—such knowledge was a help in the dark.

He had counted off twenty when the hand he held out before him struck solid surface. He explored it, finding heavy metal bands across a door. Finally his fingers tightened on a kind of latch common enough on Vallek.

Quietly Kenric bore down on the bar. If the door were locked, he was defeated. But the bar moved. He might be the greatest fool in the world, but he had no choice. He pushed open the door and walked into danger.

V

THE light came from small insets of the orm ore but they were not parts of pictures. And the plain passage was like any of the lower tunnels.

He had expected a guard. None was visible. Kenric closed his eyes. He had known the oracle's seat at once; could he trace the path from here? But if his briefing had once laid out a path it had not survived his imperfect sending. He would have to depend upon any hunch or faint suggestion. So he padded down that dusty way, alert to any sound.

The light was so dim that when he glanced back he could see only the outline of the door. And just before him the corridor angled right to give upon a stairway. Climbing was promising for he knew that the main portion of the temple still lav well overhead.

Soon the ore patches were gone and again he had to depend more on touch than sight. Another door, this one banded also with metal—as if both this and the other had been intended for defensive measures. But for all his fumbling he could find here no latch.

Baffled, Kenric leaned one shoulder to the wall. It would seem this portal opened only from the other side, bottling him in. But he was not ready for defeat. Once more he felt across its surface, beginning systematically at the top. The metal bands were close set and the edges of some serrated, deeply gashed in places—as if torn by fangs. The worms!

Niccolae down there—but she had the blazer...

No hint of any latch or handhold—not until he reached studs on the fourth bar. One of those moved a fraction. For want of any other encouragement, he caught it with his nails and turned. There was a distinct click. There was answering movement.

What he had so unlatched was not the whole of the door but only a narrow panel. So narrow that he had difficulty wriggling through. On the other side, as it thudded back into place, he found indications that in the past the whole door had been sealed.

Ahead was the foot of another staircase. Orm ore lights appeared again, small and far apart, as the stairs narrowed. His shoulders brushed the walls on either side. Now he heard a murmur as of voices, which seemed to come out of the stone on his right. There was a dark patch there and he stopped to examine it more closely, finding it to be a circle of metal that slipped to one side to reveal a peephole.

Kenric looked through. Some distance below was the pavement of a long hall, its roof supported be a series of pillars carven and painted to resemble rearing fire worms. They were not entirely lifelike, having certain horrific embellishments to make them even more vicious looking.

But they were much worn, legs broken off here and there, missing tentacles, cracks across their painted armor plates—giving them the seeming of great age. Among them men moved—priests. Kenric's briefing named the red robes with their wide collars of clawlike ornaments that resembled either dried worm tentacles or excellent representations of such. Most of the men wore their cowls up about their heads so he could not see their faces. But two almost directly below the peephole did not. Their shaven heads glistened in the light and they had the countenances of young men.

Kawyn? There could be no mistaking the tribal tattoos on their cheeks. The part of Kenric in this borrowed body responded to that marking. He heard his breath hiss, realized his hand fumbled at his belt for a weapon he did not wear.

Talking with the Kawyn was another man, much shorter, almost

dwarfish. He wore no robe. Instead, his squat body was only half-clothed in a lower garment which was boots and breeches in one. It was made of a leathery stuff which gave off prismatic gleams as he moved, as if that leather or skin was overlaid with opaline scales. His wide shoulders and barrel chest carried a shag of coarse black hair, and another long tuft of it hung in a single strand from the point of his chin though the rest of his face was clean. The growth on his head had been trained and hardened with some substance into the semblance of a comb, beginning above his forehead and extending to the nape of his neck. Half buried in his furry body hair was a wealth of jewel-set metal.

A Rover? Then it was true—the men of Dupt came into Orm. If one needed any further proof of the dire disaster for Lanascol brewed here, the sight of that party of three supplied it amply.

Their voices reached Kenric only as a murmur, strain as he did to hear. And there was no use lingering at this peephole with the goal of his quest still ahead. He started on, but he was thinking of the significance of what he had seen.

To find Rovers in any kind of alliance was startling. From what he knew of Vallek, the Rovers lived enemies to all others. The reason for their exile from the human race was lost in the mists of unremembered time. But by now they were so alien to others that they might be considered of another species. Their very territory was a secret, for all their raids were carried out by air and no tracker on the ground had ever been able to follow them. Since technology on Vallek had not yet advanced to the invention of sky travel, the raiders were invulnerable.

Their form of travel was to ride giant flying reptiles, not too unlike very ancient creatures of Kenric's home world, predating the evolution of mankind. The things in themselves were terrifying opponents in any battle. Ridden by rapacious men, they were doubly fearsome.

It was thought that the numbers of both Rovers and their mounts were small, since never more than ten or so made up a raid squad. But few as they might number, they were formidable. So far they had harried only farming communities, fishing villages along the coast, caravans of traders stupid enough to venture far into the wastes for a quicker journey.

Kenric judged he must now be well above the hall. His hand rested on a second spy-hole, this time to the left. And he made use of it.

He saw not a hall but a small chamber. It held a massive table with a top of lustrous kiffa stone mounted on thick pillar legs. At its head, almost directly below, was a chair with a tall carved back. Along the sides of the table ran benches. At the far end stood a second chair. The walls were hung, save about the peephole, with strips of dark red cloth, giving the unpleas int impression of drawing about the table to entrap and stifle those litting there. Yet the four men who did so appeared at their ease.

No one occupied the chair, but on the benches, facing each other across the smooth surface in pairs, sat the four. And they were very different. One was a red-robed priest, his garments so much the color of the wall draperies behind him that at times he seemed to disappear. The more so because he wore his cowl up and only the movements of his hands were noticeable.

At his side sat another of the Rovers, as much like the one Kenric had sighted before as to be his twin. He played with something as he listened—a band of metal, which, fitting over his hand below the knuckles, provided him with a set of vicious claws into which he slipped his fingers as he might wear a glove.

To Kenric's right were the other two. One wore the clothing of a courtier of Lanascol and the device worked on the breast of his tunic. Kenric's hand rose mechanically to touch his own, grimed as it was. The royal arms! But—was the Kor-King already here! Though that any of his men would sit companionably with a Rover was not believable.

There was only one answer—the Lady Yarakoma. In her burning ambition she might have taken the final step to ally herself with the Kor-King's enemies, sent some spokesman here. He wished at that moment he had Kenric's own memory to draw upon.

The fourth man wore clothing which might be that of any lower class citizen of Lanascol. Yet he sat at ease with the noble, and both the priest and the Rover were listening to what he said in a voice so low that only the rise and fall of tone reached Kenric.

That fourth man now brought out a writing stick and began to draw swift lines on the table top. But he was never to finish what he was trying to picture. The drapes on the left wall were twitched aside and looped back for the coming of another priest, who then stood deferentially aside to allow the passage of a smaller figure, much muffled in a robe which appeared too large for his meager body.

The robe was banded at shoulder level with a crossing of rustorange, and the necklace or collar was more elaborate than those of the others. The men at the table looked up and the courtier, the priest, and the stranger who had been drawing all arose. However the Rover only grinned, remaining seated. He made it plain that he would make no polite gesture.

Then the priest who had entered first offered his small companion the support of his arm—only to have that shoved away petulantly. But the progress of his superior towards the chair at the head of the table was a wavering one and the priest pressed close, ready to steady the other if need be.

Once seated in the chair, the small man raised two hands as claw-like as the metal glove with which the Rover still played. These shook with a constant tremor as he swept back his cowl.

"You have asked for speech—" The ancient priest's voice was shrill and high-pitched. "You have your chance—speak! This is a time wherein there is much to be done, much to be done. If you trouble the Ceremonies for a thing of little import, then there shall be a reckoning."

It was the man with the writing stick who answered, this time raising his voice so Kenric could hear him.

"The Mightiness of Orm would certainly not be troubled during his preparations for the great day without need. It is thus—our brother-in-heart-and-hope, the Swordmaster Suward, has brought news. It seems that the thrice-cursed Kenric and the seeing woman are not where they were left. Yet they were well bound. When his men passed by the Place of Ancient Stones—they were gone! Even the Rovers have taken to the sky to spy them out, but without result."

"Fools," sputtered the mummy in the chair. Suward shrank back as if the ancient priest had spewed forth poison instead of a word. "The Place of Ancient Stones is accursed, as all know," the old one continued. "If Orm has seen fit to take them to himself, of course you would find no sign of them. Is this your great news?"

"O High Priest of Orm, suppose Orm in his infinite wisdom is

not responsible for their disappearance? Suppose they have managed to escape? Should they reach Lanascol with their tale—"

The Rover laughed with harsh contempt. He spoke sourly, his words so accented and twisted Kenric could hardly understand him. "They will not. Our riders will make sure. The desert is easy to search from aloft."

"True." The writer nodded. "But if the Kor-King comes—and Suward has brought us assurance that he will—there is a chance, is there not, that our fugitives might meet with some scout of his?"

The High Priest screwed around to look directly at the courtier. "Why would the Kor-King n arch with scouts? What know you of this? He was sent the High W and of Orm. One does not bring an army against Orm." He paused the emit a high tittering sound, sickening to hear. "Does he not remember that once a Kor-King came to Orm weapons in hand, though he did not go hence again? No, no." His tittering grew stronger, shaking his whole shrunken body. And his attendant pressed closer, put out one hand hesitatingly. But his master controlled that evil shadow of mirth. He leaned back in the chair, smeared the sleeve of his robe across his pale, wrinkled lips. "Now," his voice became firmer. "Answer me—does the Kor-King march with scouts—and why?"

"Because of the Lord Kor Kenric," Suward answered. "Somehow the King's Eyes were able to trace him to the witch-hag's house. The Eyes are many and the King has some not even his heir can put name to. What they found there suggested struggle. Also the roll keeper of the gate mentioned a late-moving cart, outward bound. Before it reached my Lady's ears it was a story already past her changing. She did hasten to muddy it where she could with suggestions concerning Kenric and the witch, and the unnatural longings of evil men. But that slime does not stick well on Kenric. He has walked too warily and many remember why she hates him—may the Thousand Teeth of Namur gnaw the flesh from his bones!"

For the first time the priest sitting at the table spoke.

"Mightiness, remember what you yourself have said. To have a female mixed with such high matters is not only an abomination to Orm, but also great folly—"

Perhaps it was his taunting tone rather than the words uttered that aroused the courier.

"Speak so of the Lady, and—"

"Silence to this yapping!" The High Priest's voice again held the ghostly timbre of what once must have been a resonant tone. "The female has served us in her own fashion. She has given us an ear to many secret matters, though this taking of the Lord Kor was a badly done affair. It is of prime importance that the Kor-King obey the Word. But he seems to be doing it more as an enemy than a servant. And servant he is, as he shall learn! Orm has long hinted of a new day when he shall make plain his words—and those shall be the law not only of Orm Temple but of all Vallek! Long, long has been the waiting in the night. Now comes the dawn. For even Kor-King, when he hears the true words of Orm from the oracle, cannot nay-say them. And if he does play the fool and tries, there are enough true believers among his people to make his end. So—a few days more and we shall be the fingers and the hands of Orm reaching forth to hold the world!"

There were small flecks of spittle on his lips and he scrubbed at them with his sleeve. The two other priests had bowed their heads, Suward likewise, and even the lay stranger nodded. Only the Rover sat grinning, giving no more respect to Orm than he did to Orm's followers.

"Much to be done." The firmer note was gone from the High Priest's voice. He was querulous again. "Do not disturb us again—too much to be done. The oracle must be prepared—"

He struggled to get to his feet and the two priests had to move in to raise him. This time he did not push them away but shuffled out between them. The other men watched them go in silence.

When the door latch clicked, the Rover laughed.

"Strange—he still has wits enough, that old one. Much has he planned and planned well, that I will say for him." He paused, his eyes narrowed. He looked first to Suward, then to the stranger. "Or is he the planner? Not that it means much at this time. But that one, he also believes in his own god tales—that this Orm will come riding on a giant fire worm to conquer the world. Such a tale is for the thick-headed. Now this is what the All-Mother of Dupt would have me learn—" He tapped his claws on the table directly before the stranger. "What gain you from this? The Kawyns—all know what they want. And this Yarakoma would see her husband Kor-King

with no rival such as Kenric, who is a good fighter and well liked by your maggot city-dwellers. And the priests yell of Orm and prophecy spouted out of the mouth of a drooling madman that Orm comes to rule the world. Three reasons for swearing partnership—at least for the span of putting down the Kor-King. But you—you have given no reason your suggested help. This I will say of you, stranger, you speak well when you talk of war and manners of outwitting the enemy." He spat, and the splatter of moisture lay in a drop on the board. He put a claw to it and drew a small wet line that crossed the one made with the writing stick. "We have been promised loot—which is well enough—and a chance to 'ry our wings south. Now, what is your portion? I have heard strant e tales of you—that you are not of this world, that you brought the unusual weapons given to some of our men. To what end do you this? The All-Mother would like to know!"

"Fair enough. You have seen some of the weapons and what they can do. There are to be more and greater ones in the future. As for my gain—it is a simple thing, Rover, one meaning little to the rest of you. I want orm ore. You are right—I am not of this world, and orm ore is of Vallek only. We cannot buy it from the temple for they deem it Orm's sweat. But if we help the High Priest achieve his purposes, then Orm will smile on us and we shall be granted favors."

"Or take them—when this fire-worm hill is in such ferment none can be spared to say you nay."

Suward started, shot a quick glance at the stranger. But the latter did not seem disturbed.

"Or take it," he agreed, "Does that disgust you, or would it trouble your All-Mother?"

"Not so. It is such a play as we would relish. As for Orm ore—what matters it? City man—" he stared at Suward now—"get your wench her throne if you can. Though whether she will thereafter sit steady on it, is another matter. It is enough we understand each other—for this time."

He slid off the bench, turning his back on the two without farewell to tramp out of the chamber. Suward ran his hands nervously back and forth on the edge of the table. "I distrust all Rovers."

The other man shrugged. "As who does not? It is a pity that they must be used. But they have what we need most at the moment—a

path through the sky. Also they are potent in battle. Have you not had proof of that in the past?"

"Yes. But they hold to no oaths-"

"You forget. This one does speak boldly as do his fellows. But we have that which will finish them in the end."

"Not we—you," Suward returned. "You have shown us that picture of your fashioning which makes it seem that you have found their foul nest. You have assured us that certain of your men with their flame weapons have it under control but that these here know nothing of it."

"Do not doubt the truth of that. The Rovers will serve us just as long as they are needed. When that moment is passed, they will be treated—so—"

He snapped the writing stick in two.

"Now, as His Mightiness says, the hour grows late—"

"Will his oracle perform as he thinks, I wonder?" Suward made no move to rise. He appeared wanting assurance, or so it seemed to Kenric.

"Has it not always been so in the past? Yes, I think that idiot will mouth a proper prophecy. And, if the Kor-King is not impressed thereby, there will be means to make it clear to him that a new day dawns on Vallek."

"If he comes—"

The stranger swung around to face Suward. "Is there any doubt of that?" he asked sharply.

"He might not come at Orm's summons. But if he thinks he marches to free Kenric... Maltus has the cloak we took from Kenric and other things, as well as a good tale. And the Lady Yarakoma will do all she can. If he will not move to Orm's call, he will to the other—"he repeated.

"If we still had Kenric we would be on safer ground."

Suward laughed. "If his body is not huddled somewhere in the Place of Ancient Stones, it is certainly sundried out in the waste. There is no way any man can cover the desert on foot without water. Even if he walks shoulder to shoulder with a sorceress. There being a limit to her power also."

"But it will be your business, my friend, to make sure, very sure, that the King does march."

Suward replied sullenly. "Do I not know it? Be sure—he will come."

"I trust so," said the other and left as abruptly as the Rover.

KENRIC let fall the peephole shutter. He had heard plenty. If the worm priests, Yarakoma, the Kawyn, the Rovers and the enigmatic stranger had made so uneasy an alliance, then there was still hope. Already the stranger and Suward had agreed to the blotting out of the Rovers when their usefulness was over. And he did not doubt the Rovers nursed private lans against their allies, too.

But as uneasy as that alliance was if it held long enough to break the Kor-King it would in turn break Vallek. Was the oracle really important now? The Orm priests needed the oracle to fire them, true enough. But the others already privately discounted that goad—their schemes depended upon the lure of Kenric himself.

Therefore the priorities had now shifted. It was no longer the oracle that mattered but a warning to the King. Were his enemies unable to trap him in the wastes, they might turn on one another. The resulting chaos could only favor the Kor-King.

Perhaps it had not been so misdirected after all, his awakening in this body. The Kor-King might not have been influenced by any prophecy but he would listen to his son. And, though the compulsion of the briefing ran deep, Kenric could break it. Now he must reach the Kor-King with news of what brewed here, must ready Lanascol before the pot boiled over.

As he descended the stairs at the best pace the steep fall allowed him, Kenric was already planning. The conspirators were right. A journey over the desert could not be made afoot—not with Rovers scouting in the heavens for anything moving. Besides, there had to be means to carry water and supplies.

Which left—the fire worms! Some were saddled; ergo, they had been ridden. And what other men could ride, so could—so must—Kenric now.

Arriving back at the chair ledge he paused, another thought coming to mind. He was as certain as if he had been told it during briefing that the plate of energy material, against which the head of the oracle must rest, had something to do with the prophecy. Could that material be damaged, slowing so the march of events?

There was, he decided, only one way of dealing with it and that would mean the devastation would be visible to the priests at once. Still—if the trouble pointed in turn to one of their allies—

He grinned. A good trick. The means perhaps of accomplishing double result—defeating the oracle and sowing discord among the enemy.

His descent to the floor below was quick and then he ran for the mouth of the tunnel where Niccolae should be waiting. Then he saw her moving out to meet him.

"Give me—" He snatched the weapon out of her hands, turned back.

"Are they after you?" She ran behind him.

He sighted on the tall back of the chair. He pressed the button. A ray of brilliant white crisped through the air, centering on the target.

Only an instant did he hold it so, astounded by the resulting violence. The chair exploded with a roar, erupting fragments of stone riven and blackened as if the plate had covered some cache of high explosive.

Kenric was momentarily deafened, then alarmed. He tried to protect the girl with his body, snatching her back to the tunnel mouth as by a miracle they escaped the rain of stones.

"That noise will bring guards on us. We must take action fast!" Quickly he explained his reason for blasting the chair and his contemplated course. "I wonder what is the method of controlling the riding worms," he finished.

Once more she brought out her orm ore sphere. "This gives one a measure of control over the human mind, facilitating hypnotic suggestion. Whether it will work with a worm, I cannot tell. But I can try it."

"If they have borne riders in their saddles, there must be some way of reaching the beast. Let us find one."

"Suppose we do," she said. "Where then do we ride it?"

"To find the Kor-King." Swiftly he outlined what he had overheard. "If he is warned—"

"Then those plotters will ask who is responsible for their betrayal—each suspecting the other. A new way to win a war!" She laughed.

"Only if it works." He throttled down the excitement that might threaten a clear head. "There are many chances for failure. We must find a worm, must take it out of here, must cross the desert safely in spite of the Rover scouts, must locate the Kor-King in time—"

"There is your first requirement," Niccolae said, pointing to the tunnel leading to the open-air worm pen.

Kenric lifted his gaze. A hugh three-eyed head had appeared in the archway. The jaw tentacles were working in spasmodic jerks as if the creature were dangerous. Probably the explosion had alarmed it. Seen from ground level, the worm as it emerged from the tunnel mouth looked formidable enough to tense Kenric's grip on the blazer. In its fear and rage, would it ttack the two who proposed to ride it?

Niccolae raised the sphere to her lip, breathed upon it three times. After staring into it intently, she tossed it aloft. It flew through the air and landed as a feeble spark of light on the pavement before the worm.

The creature stopped short, ugly head swinging from side to side. Then it lowered its head as if to sniff at the sphere. It froze so. The writhing tentacles at its mouth relaxed.

Niccolae touched Kenric's arm with pressure. He remained where he stood as she walked forward. But he held his weapon aligned on the middle eve of the worm in the event that skill failed.

Now she stood facing the worm, the sphere between them. Her hands moved into the faint light, weaving a pattern in the air as if they manipulated threads of a netting. He guessed she so endeavored to imprison whatever mind the creature possessed.

Finally she stopped, surveying the worm closely. Then she clapped her hands. The limp tentacles curled up under the worm's chin. Ponderously it squatted, folding its jointed legs until it was belly flat on the pavement. Niccolae beckoned as she restored the sphere to its hiding place. Kenric boosted her into the wide saddle, took his seat before her and lifted the reins. As if that were a signal the worm recognized, it grunted and arose.

Kenric used the reins as he would control any mount, turning the giant worm toward the corridor down which they had originally come.

The worm bore them swiftly and truly. Occasionally its sides brushed the tunnel walls, adding another touch of smoothness to surfaces thus smoothed by generations of worms. When they reached the dark pool below the stairway, they dismounted to drink deeply. The worm drank also. Unfortunately they had no way to take water with them.

To negotiate the stairs, they were obliged to remain dismounted. Niccolae walked first with the sphere as a beacon. Kenric followed, the reins of the worm looped about his arm. Last went the creature, grunting dolefully as if it found the climb taxing. Taxing? A great weight of fatigue lay on Kenric also. What must it be, he thought, for the girl? Since they had awakened in the desert after their kidnapping, they had had no sleep. In fact, here below time had not been divided into night and day, hour and minute. Even thinking of rest weighed his feet, made him feel as if he were wading thick deep through shifting sand.

When he caught up to her, she forced herself to lurch forward. Though she kept one hand to the wall for support, she fell. As she tried to struggle up. Kenric moved to her, managed to get her back in the saddle. But he could not raise himself after her. Instead he caught at the edge of one of the worm's armor plates and allowed the creature to both support and lead him. It was as if that last climb up the stairs had drained all but the dregs of strength from him.

The wall-carvings moved past as if they walked through a dream. And Kenric was never sure afterward that he did not doze on his feet, as he had heard it said that wearied soldiers were able to do. But he roused into full consciousness when the huge worm came to a halt.

He looked about him. There were no carved and lighted walls now, only a dim, grayish light high up. And before them a barrier of rocky debris.

They were back at the crumbled pit in the desert through which they first entered the passage.

Kenric fought for a clear mind. He pulled at the girl who had fallen forward in the saddle so that she lolled against the double horn-carrying the pack made up of her robe. He croaked her name. "Niccolae!"

She stirred, whimpered, tried to resist his tugging. With a grunt, the worm squatted, as if expecting its inert rider to now dismount.

She rolled off the worm, lay still but with her eyes half opened. Probably she was as parched as he. Water. Where would they get water? In despair he beat his hands against the plated side of the worm. Where had his mind been? They would have to go back, down into the burrows, try to find another way...

Kenric slipped, fell to the drifted sand. The girl's eyes fully closed. The great worm grunted and went limp.

Man, maid and monster slept.

HE roused groggily. His head was thumping against rock as someone shook his shoulders, called out to awaken him. He blinked, tried to raise his hand to shield his eyes.

A glare of light was thrusting in through a gaping hole not too far away.

He saw Niccolae leaning over him. She st hed with relief and let go her hold on his shoulders.

She turned to pick up something, held it out to him. It was half of one of those ball fruits from which juice trickled to splash on his face.

He came fully awake at the sight of that. Burying his face in the soft pulp, he chewed to allay both hunger and thirst.

As he scooped the tough rind with his teeth, he looked about for a second piece. She shook her head.

"But little remains now. For the worm must eat also. Food was the inducement for it to clear our way." She pointed to the ragged hole in the debris of the landslide.

"Food? Not the sphere?"

Her grim face sketched a caricature of a smile. "One of these too ripe for our eating." She was stowing their remaining fruits back into the bag of her robe, save for a side sorting which already showed a sprouting of mold or gave forth a putrid smell. This she shoveled onto a tattered square of rag, and got up to hurl the stinking mess through the opening. "I climbed up and poked the bait into a deep crevice. The worm crashed the barrier to get it." She peered through the hole. Now it eats the rest of its dinner."

So simple a solution. Kenric drew a deep breath. In his fatigue and male preoccupation he had even forgotten that Niccolae still possessed that pack of food.

"We need not fear its leaving us," she told him. "It feeds upon that too rotten for our eating. And I think that these worms have a long history of dependence upon men for sustenance."

"How long did I sleep?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I slept also. But it was night when I awoke, and now it is late day. Since night would cloak us while we travel, it might be well we start now—"

He nodded.

They emerged through the jagged exit into the desert outside. There the worm still chomped at the stuff she had thrown to it. But at the sight of them it kneeled. Once more they settled in its saddle. Niccolae pointed to a distant blue rock spur making a leaning point against the sky.

"That I remember. The men who left us turned their backs upon it when they went. The question is—were they returning to Lanascol or going to Orm Temple? We do not want to take the wrong direction."

"Let the stars rise," she told him, "and I shall have guides in plenty. Reading the stars is part of my sorcery and I know those that hang above Lanascol well. But for now—I cannot say this is the right way, or that—"

The worm stirred uneasily, as if it wanted to be on the move. Kenric hesitated. There were landmarks in plenty—fantastic outcroppings all about them—to keep them from wandering in circles. But which way to start out?

"Fortune has been fair to us so far," he said. "I see no better way than to start by chance. Let us believe that those who took us were to return to Lanascol."

He set the worm going with a twitch of rein.

Their mount was plainly a desert creature. While this particular one might not have run the sands since it was hatched, its body was designed to travel here, the broad padded feet at the ends of those segmented legs finding a good surface even on sand.

They left the ruins behind them, threading in and out among standing rocks until they came to a section that was mainly shifting sand dunes. Only a rocky outcrop here and there showed, like broken teeth in the jaw of a sun-bleached skull. The sun, which had been a torment at their start, faded in force. The gathering of dusk began.

Kenric steered for a set of rocks he thought on a direct line with their progress so far. Beyond those he picked another goal ahead. He hoped it would not be long before the stars appeared.

Soon the dark was too deep to see a guide ahead. However, the baking heat was gone with the light. There was a cold wind blowing, making Kenric long for a cloak. He knew that Niccolae, having sacrificed her outer robe, must feel the chill even more.

"Cling close to me," he ordered. "At least we can warm each other."

She clung. But her eyes were searching the heavens, in which the first glimmers were appearing.

"Mark that star! Ah, we were right to trust fortune. Angle a little to the left—do you not see that bright gleam? It is the apex of a triangle with two lesser lights at its foot—"

The constellation was easy enough to distive uish.

"The Arrow of Attu," said Niccolae. "J will bring us to Lanas-col."

Eventually the wind died. No longer did they have to breathe the gritty particles.

Still the worm padded on tirelessly. At times the creature detoured right or left to avoid some rocky ridge, but always it obeyed Kenric's rein signal to correct course. Clinging to Kenric, Niccolae slept. He was glad for her.

He was not aware of dawn until the sky was pale lemon, slowly darkening to the bright orange-yellow of full day, bringing back the heat. Now at last the worm was slowing. Against Kenric's back, Niccolae moved. Her hands gave up their tight hold on him.

"Let the beast eat." Her voice was a husky whisper.

She was right. If they did not satisfy the worm, it might refuse to serve them.

He loosened rein and immediately the worm squatted. It began to grunt in what to Kendric seemed a demanding fashion. Its riders promptly dismounted. Niccolae tottered a little away and kneeled to open the bundle of food.

The smell of it was rank. The worm's head swung around, its tentacles uncoiled and working, plainly avid for the rotten stuff. The girl picked over what lay there, chose one of the balls. This she split with a pointed rock, showing too-soft inner pulp. Kenric neverthe-

less was ready to share it. Niccolae threw to the worm most of the mass, retaining only a small portion.

"The rest in the pack has all gone bad," she told him bleakly. "We shall keep a little for the worm to feed again. But for us—"

"Wait!" He threw out a hand to silence her staring about him. There was nothing here for shelter, not even a sizable rocky spire. And those dots he saw in the sky, growing larger every second—were they Rovers?

There was a ridge ahead. Could they reach it in time?

"Mount up!" He caught her and shoved her toward the worm.

VI

THE creature protested in coughing grunts. But it got to its feet and obeyed the signal to move out. There was no way to spur it to a faster pace. Not until, out of the sky, sounded a ripping screech.

The scaled body jumped in an convulsive indraw for a moment. Then it lengthened out again as the creature went into a rocking gallop while its riders fought to keep in the saddle.

That screech sounded again—louder and nearer. A Rover patrol right enough. Kendric could easily see now the reptilian forms of the flyers with the smaller figures of men mounted between their leather wings. The leader of the flight was planing down.

"Take the reins!" Kenric thrust them at Niccolae as he lifted his weapon.

He fired. A blinding beam of radiance speared. The flyer disappeared in the burst of flame.

A second flyer was too close on the leader to pull up and Kenric fired again. This time a sudden movement of the worm threw him off aim. Screeching, the flyer veered. But the edge of the blast must have singed its wing for it flapped away heavily not soaring as its flock mates did.

Kenric had no idea of the weapon's range. He fired again at a more distant flyer. It remained untouched. Then to the left and ahead geysered a blast of sand and gravel. The dust and grit billowed to fill his eyes. He could not see to aim again.

The bombardment from above continued, ringing them with flying sand and earth. Thus blinded, they had no chance to find the doubtful protection of the ridge. The worm twisted its body, flung up its head. Suddenly it halted, went flat with a jolt that shook them out of the saddle into the storm of sand.

Kenric leaped back in the direction of the worm, now only a shadow in the cloud of grit. He clung to its bulk, one hand anchored to a plate trying to see. The three-eyed head was sinking into the sand, and he could feel the legs moving—the worm was digging in!

Reins—but he did not have the reins! Niccolae had been holding those. Was the creature to dig in and leave them here half-buried, easy prey for the Rovers?

"Niccolae!" His mouth filled with sand as he called but he was answered.

"Here!"

He glimpsed Niccolae crouched on the other side of the worm, her body taut as she pulled with all her strength on the reins. He joined her, setting the blazer between his knees, pulling on the reins with her to check the worm. Twice he stopped to raise the weapon and blast Rovers out of the sky.

That taught them caution. The attack ce used and with it the sandstorm raised by the bombardment. He could see them still, but they circled too high to reach now.

Heat came with the rising sun. Their worm-mount with its self-burial might well have the best idea for more than one kind of escape. Should they remain where they now were, they would be dead by day's end. The enemy need only pin them in place to win a one-sided battle.

Since the worm appeared quiet, half in the ground, half out, Kenric relaxed somewhat.

"Can you hold?" he asked the girl.

"If it continues to lie thus, yes. What do you do?"

"I want to see what they dropped to churn the sand."

With the blazer under his arm, he zigzagged to the core of tumbled earth and sand from which one of those miniature whirlwinds had risen. There was a pit scooped out, a space bare of even the finest shifting of sand, and sun glinted on metal. Kenric edged closer, used the butt of his weapon to turn the thing over that he might see it more clearly.

He would swear that this was not made on Vallek. It was a slim

disk which had a bulbous end, a more slender portion pointing up. On that was a flexible round of small blades that whirled as the thing moved under his prodding. He had heard rumors of such a weapon somewhere in the galaxy—called, if he remembered rightly, an ovid.

Those slight blades must be incredibly strong to have sent soaring such volumes of sand and earth. Kenric frowned. So the Rovers were armed with what would bring the most confusion to desert travelers, allowing the attackers to stay at a safe distance.

What had been used to harry the two worm-riders into a kind of captivity could easily be turned against an army in this waste. Suppose such were hurled about the Kor-King's force until those comprising it were so separated and storm-blinded that a land-based enemy, waiting in reserve, could overrun them?

The ovid fell on its side. Instantly those blades began to spin, cutting into a small drift of sand, sending the dust up so Kenric jumped back, his arm raised to shield his face and eyes.

"What is it?" he heard Niccolae cry out.

Kenric backed away, wreathed in dust clouds. Then he bumped against the worm and crouched low as the sand continued to fountain up as if the ovid had rolled to where it had new earth to cut into. Screening his eyes he looked around. The one fountain was matched by a second now—but they were both dying down now. And he did not know how many more there were.

He crawled to where Niccolae lay in the lee of the half-buried worm. Quickly he explained his find.

"So the Rovers are armed with an off-world device."

"If they are really off-worlders." Though he no longer doubted that. There was a high and alien level of technology behind what he had seen.

The spouting of sand thinned, ceased. But nothing would shut off the sun. Above the Rovers continued to circle, though there were fewer of them now. He counted only three.

But they need only play the waiting game up there and the desert would do the rest for them. He could see no way out of the trap. He heard an exclamation from Niccolae.

"Look here!" She had scooped sand away from the body of the worm. A strong odor violated the air. About the lower plates of the

creature's body oozed a sticky substance that trickled down to the sand. Where it moistened the loose particles they hardened into a shell, making a small wall.

Quickly Kenri, did some digging of his own, to discover a wall along the length of his side of the worm's body. It was evidently able to build a secure tunnel as it went. If there were some way of controlling its direction underground—

"The sphere!" Niccolae brought out that most precious of her possessions. "But even if it digs a way—how can we be sure that it heads in the right direction?"

"We can't," he said. "But we can gain protection from the sun and from those over us. We can buy a little time." The thought revived his spirit.

Sphere in hand, the girl crept to the head of the monster. When they had checked its dig-in it had already sunk close to the level of its eyes. But those three unblinking globes were still above the sand surface, enough to see what she held. Now she placed the sphere there. Could she again impress her will?

Perhaps she was unsure of her form c/communication. For at first she only huddled there, looking mc/e to the sphere than the worm. Then she reached out both hand, not to pick up the globe but rather to use her hooked fingers to dig into the sand, achieving so a shallow depression. Obviously she was attempting hypnotic suggestion.

Finally she picked up the sphere, returned to Kendric's side. "I do not know—" she was saying when, with almost the same force as one of the digging ovids, the worm went into action.

Kenric pulled her away from a whirlwind of debris. The worm was digging in all right, at a far greater speed than earlier. As if all the energy gained during its enforced rest was being called upon to get it underground as speedily as possible.

Debris was shooting out now in another direction. The worm was out of sight. Only the stream of earth spiraling up to mound about a hole marked its going. Could the Rovers see what was happening? If it brought them in to make sure—Kenric fingered the stock of the blazer. A thin hope, but he clung to it.

Kenric wriggled up the mound to look down into a pit. Below the outer ring of loose earth and sand were the slick walls glued by the excretion of the worm's body. On one side was the entrance to a tunnel.

So—here was a hiding hole, screened from sun and overhead observation. He called to Niccolae, then slipped cautiously over the treacherous rim of the pit. He held up his arms to steady her as the girl followed. The entrance to the worm's tunnel was not much larger than the bulk of its body but it afforded them room to crawl in. And the mere fact they had shade was an instant relief.

Kenric pushed on, only to sight the hunched, drawn-in form of the creature. He backed away carefully, not wanting to incite it to digging again and run the danger of being smothered by a backfire of earth and sand.

They were buying time, but how much? They had no water, none of the fruit which had been their stay before. He tried to think.

"It no longer digs?" Niccolae asked.

"No. Try to sleep," he suggested. "At nightfall we can—"

"If still we live," she interrupted tonelessly.

"We have this chance. Having lost sight of us, the Rovers may come nearer. If we can meet them closer to ground level—"

Her eyes closed. She breathed shallowly, as if not to hurt her laboring lungs. And he thought that she might not have heard, or chosen to hear, his words.

Then she answered without opening her eyes.

"Men have lived on dreams before, Lord Kor Kenric. And sometimes even proven them true. So let us dream—"

But if she took refuge in sleep, he must play sentry. Not that he dared expect the coming of anyone: foe—or remotely, friend. Yet he would be ready.

It was hard to fight the stupor creeping over him. It was hard to think coherently. He tried to recall all that had happened to him since his arrival on Vallek. Those at HQ must have learned long ago that he was not the oracle. But would they know who he was? And if so—could a return fix ever be set up? To his own knowledge, not since the early experimental days had a sending misplaced an agent. He would be at least a footnote now in the confidential history tapes stored in ZAT.

Having failed with him were they trying to send another agent? If so, would that fail because of the blasted chair now in the worm walk? How had the priests used that plate in the seat back, anyway? How had—?

Kenric roused. He saw, out in the pit, what had snapped him out of his dreamy state. A cascade of sand hissed down its wall. Someone stood on the top of the mound of excavated sand. Kenric shouldered closer to Niccolae. One hand covered her lips lest she make some sound, the other shook her awake. When he saw her eyes open and focus intelligently, Kenric motioned to the pit. The sand had ceased trickling; perhaps who moved above was listening, too.

Suddenly one of the ovids was lobbed into the pit, its fan beating up a storm in such earth as the worm secretion had not glued.

The flying cloud was thin and it did not reach into the tunnel. But it might be cover for another form of attack. Weapon ready, Kenric waited grimly.

The wait ended as a dark figure leaped down, kicking the still revolving disrupter out of the way. There was a spurt of flame, but Kenric had fired at the same time—with better aim. The attacker exploded into shredded flesh. Niccolae cried out, beating against Kenric's shoulder, tearing loose smo' lering strips of tunic where the other's ray had ignited fabric and ared skin. But Kenric was alive and the other dead.

They would try again. Kenric sped into the open, swept the top of the mound without taking direct ray, spraying the blazer's fire in a wide sweep as he pivoted.

The very fury of that move won. There was a scream of anguish. He saw a man who had stood directly above the tunnel entrance stagger back, his hands flung up to hide his face.

Kenric identified him as a Rover. But the other who lay in a singed heap in the pit was not. Kenric went to the dead man. His face had escaped the blast, and he was not a Kawyn, nor of Lanascol either. His skin was faintly greenish and the hair, still remaining was of a mottled gray—humanoid, but alien. The remains of his clothing suggested a space uniform. Kenric forced himself to search the body.

He found little, mainly the charred remnants of a belt to which various tools or instruments had been slung, most of which were now melted into unidentifiable blobs. Of his origin there no clue. However, his death, in addition to saving their lives, provided them

with a second weapon. It was a hand arm, short barreled, lacking the telescopic sights of the first. He picked it up to bring back to Niccolae.

What interested him now was how these men had reached them. It could only be that the Rover must have landed his mount somewhere near. And perhaps that flying thing could signal trouble to any of the flock still aloft.

The only answer was to turn defense into offense again. The force of that spray he had used on the mound top had fused some of the sand into a slick surface which might be hard to climb. He spoke to Niccolae, who was examining the hand blazer.

"Try a quick blast here—and here—"

She obeyed. The flash hollowed hand and foot holds. Then the girl stationed herself below, watching the rim while Kenric swung up.

He sprawled belly down on the top, his blazer ready. And he was just in time to see a Rover mount waddling awkwardly for a take-off—a man in the saddle between its wings, clinging to the straps there while his body swaved weakly to and fro.

Kenric fired, but his burst was short though he kept his finger on the button. He pressed again. This time there was no flash at all. At the worst possible time the weapon needed recharging.

He had missed the darting head, had only frightened or irritated the flying creature into a frenzy. It somersaulted violently, throwing off its rider, then pecked him to death with two or three strokes of its great beak. Then it swept around and, with more speed than Kenric thought its clumsy gait on the ground would allow, it headed straight for him.

He threw himself backward, slid down into the pit.

The monstrous flying reptile scrabbled on the mound, and the fanning of its huge wingspread raised almost as much dust as might an ovid. With the girl, Kenric crouched in the tunnel. The walls of the pit were cracking, giving away under the thump of legs and body as the thing balanced, shooting out its long neck, trying to reach the two below.

Kenric was feeling for the smaller weapon when Niccolae fired it. The lance of flame brought a deafening screech from the flyer. It flopped forward, falling into the pit and filling most of it. At the same time came a tremor in the earth. The worm, quiet so long they had all but forgotten it, began to move. It was digging again. Earth and sand flew over them. They plastered themselves to the wall. Outside the flyer screamed and heaved, blocking any escape. They were fast being buried.

A mighty shaking followed, as if an earthquake moved. The ground around the mouth of the tunnel was being kicked in by the flyer. A beaklike mouth stabbed at them. They could only push back into the newly turned soil behind. Again that beak thrust, this time grazing Niccolae's shoulder, leaving an ooze of blood.

Somehow Kenric pushed the girl behind him, tried to get ready to meet a third attack by the beak. But he was tossed by another tremor of earth. And the attack he awaited with no hope of escaping did not come.

Instead a wild squawking sounded. The body of the flyer heaved and fought as if it tried to find standing room beyond the pit entrapping it.

Kenric used the precious moment of respite to crowd yet farther back into the fresh debris. Then Niccolae pulled at him until he turned his head a little.

"Look!"

VII

A BURST of sunlight there showed the worm gone. As it had buried itself, so it now must have attained the surface again. On hands and knees, through the choking earth, Kenric and the girl followed.

They emerged into a haze of sand as thick as that thrown up by the ovids. But through it they caught glimpses of massive bodies in battle. The huge fire worm was now seeking to bury the flyer in the pit. Kenric and Niccolae scrambled away from the sandstorm. By all the evidence they had seen, the worms were not carnivorous. But perhaps the flying reptiles were, and this was a defense against an old enemy delivered into the worm's reach.

Finally the swirl of high-flung sand subsided. Now they saw the worm clearly, crouched, its head bent, tentacles working feverishly as it watched a feeble movement under a thick mound of sand.

For the first time Kenric looked aloft. There were no Rovers in the sky. It might have been that the one who had landed had been left on guard while the others went elsewhere. Elsewhere! To try their bombing tactics against the Kor-King's force?

When he said as much, Niccolae brought out the sphere. "The worm—if we can ride—"

"We must!" Though he was not sure they could control the worm after its battle with the flyer. The heaving had subsided and the mound was now quiet. But the worm still crouched as if over an enemy.

The reins in his hand shook as the worm's head came up. The tentacles again hung loose to form a limp beard. Then the creature folded its legs under it so they could mount.

Kenric used the reins to point it once more toward the ridge he had selected just before they had been attacked. The flat padpad of the worm's jolting walk began again.

In this heat, Kenric could almost believe both eye and brain were cooked to the point of imagining things. But, squinting against the glare of the sun; suddenly he saw something he thought no trick of light could produce. A flashing came from their right, sparking from near the top of one of the rocky pinnacles. Around its base arose sand swirls he knew only too well—though there were no flyers visible aloft.

"A signal!" Niccolae's fingers dug into his shoulder.

"So I thought," he rasped.

"But you do not understand—it is a signal of Lanascol!"

"Where there are traitors—" He spoke so, though he wanted to believe.

He longed for the security of the blazer, now swinging empty in the saddle scabbard, as he weighed the hand beamer. But wanting and having were poles apart. He brought the worm's head around and bore toward the wink of light.

The sandstorm about the base of that rock was dying. It was plain the ovids could run only for a limited time. And, when they reached the peak, none were discharging grit into the air. So the haze was thin and the men who leaped from the stone to face them were easy to recognize.

"Lord Kor!" The one in the lead was ploughing through the

sand toward the worm. He stared at Kenric and the giant worm as if he could hardly believe his eyes.

"They say men sight illusions in the desert," he began. "But I do not believe you are one."

"Nor am I." Kenric twitched the reins and the worm folded its legs. "Tell me, Girant, does the Kor-King ride this way?"

"Yes. He is behind—we are scouting. But there are Rovers aloft and they have the power to raise the sands to fight for them. They trapped us here but a short time ago—then flew on. We can only hope our talking mirror relayed the warning to the Kor-King's men. But Lord Kor, where have you been? What is this monster you ride? The Kor-King's Eyes in the city discovered you had been tricked by a sorceress—" For the first time he turned his stare on the girl.

"Not tricked by the Lady Niccolae," Kenric corrected him. "She was taken captive with me. There are traitors in Lanascol, right enough. But they are of a different calling than sorceress. Have you mounts?"

"We had. When the sand wind arose they stampeded."

"I must reach the Kor-King. Yet to leave you here—"

"We have a goodly fort in these rocks, such as can hold off even the snake necks of the Rovers should they attack. And anyone coming on foot will meet a warn welcome."

"There are those with the Revers with new and deadlier arms," Kenric warned. "They blast after with fire. If you see any which look so," he slapped the scabbarded weapon, "take good cover behind rocks."

Girant nodded. "Perhaps some will also come riding monsters such as you have?"

"True. Ours came from their stable. But I shall send aid as soon as I can."

"There is no need for such a promise, Lord Kor. We know of old the manner of man we serve." Girant touched two fingers to his forehead. "May fortune ride with you!"

"In what direction? I am hasty to be gone, but where?"

"See the rock wall to the south there—the double gap with the projection in the middle? Bear on that, Lord Kor, for our camp last night lay beneath it."

THE worm began its tireless trot. Kenric looked often to the sky and felt an odd shrinking between his shoulder blades, as if he were presenting his back to some fatal attack. Yet there was still no sign of Rovers.

Nor did there appear to be any disturbance of sand ahead. If they were bombing the Kor-King's men, that battle was yet out of sight. Heat bore down. Kenric thought of water, food. Should he have begged both from Girant?

Niccolae pressed to him tightly. Her head rested on his shoulder. He thought how she too must be suffering for water.

Kenric had early discovered that distances in the waste were deceptive. Now it seemed that the longer they traveled, the farther off stood the hills Girant had pointed out. Did a haze now lie between?

He heard a gasp from Niccolae. Suddenly the surface of the open ground before them was heaving, turning up, coming alive—with the emerging heads and bodies of worms. Just as their own mount had earlier dug free, so were others breaking from the burrows in which they must have traveled.

And each was carrying double—a rider controlling the worm, an armed fighter with him. Kenric tried to rein in, found he could do nothing. The worm they rode was intent upon joining its fellows.

They need only be sighted by one of those other riders to be flamed to a crisp, Kenric thought. Then, eyeing the squad carefully, he realized that none carried blazers. Theirs were only the conventional weapons of Vallek: black tubes that directed small paralyzing darts, long lances, battle swords. Where were the blazers? Were there too few of them to arm such a company? Or did the suppliers of such weapons not trust these allies? Perhaps the sight of the worms alone was intended to demoralize the Lanascol forces.

The worm they bestrode showed no sign of weariness. Instead it forged ahead through the rear guard of the squad, pushing for the van. The attackers rode in loose formation, one worm well apart from his fellows. No one took notice of the newcomers.

"Lean low as you can," Kenric ordered Niccolae.

He bent himself nearly double across the bar of the saddle. The

coarse hair of the worm whipped him, its odor stinging his eyes and nostrils. It was all Kendric and the girl could do to hold on. For the pace of the worm, plainly excited by its company, became a rocking gallop, threatening their grasp, bruising them back and front, whipping them with the steel-harsh strands of hair.

Kenric did not dare to raise his head to look at the riders around them. He could only cling and hope that the impetus of their charge would carry them through.

The worm rocked on. Kenric heard shouting, and then about them was the fury of driven sand. They were in the attack area. He shut his eyes and clung the tighter to his insecure seat. The worm skidded to a halt, dropped so that they sprawled out of the saddle, Niccolae still clinging to him, while sand arose about them. Kenric loosened hold on the reins, squirmed away, dimly aware that once more the worm was digging in and that they must not be engulfed by debris. He pulled Niccolae around. Then, with his arm upflung to shield his sand-rasped face, he staggered away.

Only to come up against a rock, a firm anchorage in this world of swirling grit. There he clung, the girl pressed against him, both with eves closed, trying to breathe.

How long that lasted he did not know. But he could hear shouting. And some of those shouts were battle cries of Lanascol. Someone caught at his shoulder, strove to loosen him from the rock. He tried to free himself without sur endering either the girl or his hold. But it was no use. He was hauled away.

Then he no longer felt the pelting of sand. He opened his eyes.

He recognized the breast badges. The Kor-King's guard. Kenric tried to speak and produced only a dull croak. Someone lifted a water bottle to his lips. He sucked avidly.

His hands hung limp. Where was the girl? Realization that she was gone brought back his mind. He managed to straighten, supported on either side by guardsmen.

"Niccolae?"

"She is here, Lord Kor. See you—" They turned him a little and he did see. She lay on the ground as one of the guard dribbled water cautiously into her mouth. The man nodded to him.

"She lives, Lord Kor. This is only a swoon."

"The Kor-King?" Kenric said, "I have news of import—"

"He comes now, Lord Kor—" Again they aided him to turn, this time to face the tall man wearing half armor, the helm set with a jeweled device.

THE last swirl of sand had subsided. It was close to sunset. There were many ledges on the rise of the rock cliff which might have been chiseled on purpose to provide seats for the waiting men. Kenric leaned back and looked to the right where the Kor-King was similarly enthroned. They could still see, on the floor of the waste, those humps which marked the dug-in worms, apparently quiescent underground. Of their late riders, those who had not died during the attack or been entrapped when their mounts began to tunnel, there were a score under guard and already being questioned by the Kor-King's officers.

"It would seem," the King observed, "that they entered battle woefully ignorant if they did not know their mounts' proclivity for seeking safety underground during sandstorms. That is ill planning. A natural result of what you have told me of their jealousies. And this defeat will not make for good feeling among them, either."

"Since I blasted the oracle throne with a weapon belonging to the strangers, they may be suspect. And as these other new weapons—these ovids—have brought defeat instead of victory, I should think any faith they have in strangers is sorely shaken. Still, it is those weapons we have most to fear."

"That and the treachery at our own core." The Kor-King took off his helm and rubbed his temples as if the weight of that headgear were too much. He was of the same general breed of all the Lanascol men, red-brown of skin, dark red of hair. Save above each ear was a patch of silver two fingers in breadth. But for that he showed no sign of age, his regular features bearing only those marks set by a vigorous life of much responsibility.

Kenric studied him as the King continued to look out over the desert. He wore well, did this Kor-King whose rule should remain intact if Vallek was not going to end a charred cinder in a future so far ahead of this twilight that the reckoning of it must be left to the machines of men of another world and age. He had accepted Kenric's wild tale with sober attention. Yet he might well have had doubts—seeing that a son who had long lain witless blurted it out while in a semi-daze. Here was evidence that the real Kenric had been one in whom men could root confidence and not have it wither.

"These off-worlders wish to deal with the priests for the ore. We have long known it has certain unique properties. Sorceresses can make use of it. Just as the superstitous Kawyn grind it into useless powder, lest it be turned against them. And speaking of sorceresses, Kenric, it would seem this Niccolae has wrought well for our line. Let her ask of us what she would—if it be within our power to grant—" He made a gesture with his hands.

"I do not think she will claim any reward."

The Kor-King laughed softly. "That may be. But rewards come at the end. And there is another woman who had also wrought some twists and turns in this matter. You have said nothing of the Lady Yarakoma save that her man, or one purporting to be her man, was in the council of priests. Your forbearance is strange. She has said much of you these past days—"

"I do not wonder at that."

"No, I suppose you do not. She has said among other things that you are still brainsick from your wound. And that while so weakened you have fallen under the spell of a sorceress who uses you for her own foul purposes."

"And these words were believe '?' Kenric could read nothing in the Kor-King's level voice. Could it be that Yarakoma still had some measure of influence?

"They had logic. My eyes reported some facts apparently bearing them out. Only, I have other, still more secret eyes. And one of them I had set on certain path of prying when word first came to me that you had suffered so badly in that border clash. It is meet that sometimes I be thought more blind than the Overgods decreed I be. The Lady Yarakoma has been scant friend to you in the past—why was it that she wished to watch so closely by your bedside when you lay without much more than breath left in you? Though she never did so alone."

Kenric smiled. "For which fact perhaps I should be devoutly thankful."

He heard the Kor-King chuckle, the dusk now veiling the other's face. "Your brother has never been noted for seeing beyond a pretty

face when he would go courting. Therefore I speak no ill of him. In his way he is a valiant and worthy son. But should he come to wear this—" The King held out his helm, only a dark shadow now—"then I have fears for what might follow in Lanascol. The Lady Yarakoma can not be denounced openly, lest she rive the kingdom top to bottom. She has many who listen while she spills well-chosen words. But it is meet that your brother be sent to hold the western marches and deal with the sea peoples. I have good reason to believe the worm priests have been meddling there. Since he will be gone for at least two years, and into a rough and dangerous country, he cannot take his loving lady with him. She will express an earnest desire to retire to the Tower of Seven Silences during that time, to find among the Wise Women there consolation and support."

Kenric lacked any knowledge of the place. But that the Kor-King had taken the best precautions to control a treacherous daughter-in-law, Kenric did not doubt.

"So much for the Lady. What of the priests, these strangers, the alliance with the Rovers and the Kawyn?"

"We shall hope your initial sowing of discord will root. I have my eyes on duty and they have their orders to muddy waters, throw fuel on fires, generally make themselves useful. The Rovers may try to assault Lanascol, though I doubt it. The worm priests, without their oracle are deeply wounded for the time. And your detailed account will be widely repeated—mainly it will state that the oracle cannot any longer be inspired in the burrows. In fact, your tale will make a saga that will enhance our house and its rule. As for the strangers—we must learn more of them. Some of our eyes will move in that direction. And we have learned that the worm-animals have their uses. We have never been free of the desert because of its nature and ours. But if we can now mounts our scouts on worms, that lack will be remedied."

Kenric nodded. The Kor-King spoke on.

"I do not say that all will be easy and one small battle wins a war. You are border-seasoned enough to know that is not so. But I do think their dark alliance will not hold now. And enemies who come to us singly we can handle. I think for Lanascol we have done well this day. Thanks to Girant who blinked us warning—and your

message. There is always a way for brave men, or so I have found. We shall return now to Lanascol, leaving only a screen of scouts, perhaps mounted on these worms. There we shall await the return of our Eyes, preparing against Rover raids or trouble from the strangers. When has it not always been so? Man thinks of what lies ahead—the prudent try to foresee. Which makes me think once more of this sorceress of yours. I find her of note. Such we would do well to bind to us."

Kenric felt the Kor-King was looking at him now with meaning. But he was suddenly too tired to care what thought might lie behind the words. He might not have completed his mission in the manner the Service had intended, but at least Lanascol still was sturdily defended and he was sure the Kor-King would rule on.

KENRIC stood just within the hangings. This room was somewhat larger than that in which Niccolae received her clients, but not by much. The scent of herbs clung to the fabric.

"We're only getting in deeper," he said without turning to look at her. "The Kor-King deserves better. He looks upon me as a partner in his plans. If I am recalled and he has left but a senseless clod—or a dead body!—that will caus someone as keen-witted as he to be suspicious. You might report to the suspicious to be suspicious. You might report to the suspicious with the said without turning to look at her without a senseless clod—or a dead body!—that will caus someone as keen-witted as he to be suspicious. You might report to the said without turning to look at her. "The Kor-King deserves better. He looks upon me as a partner in his plans. If I am recalled and he has left but a senseless clod—or a dead body!—that will caus someone as keen-witted as he to be suspicious. You might report to the said without turning to look at her. "The Kor-King deserves better. He looks upon me as a partner in his plans. If I am recalled and he has left but a senseless clod—or a dead body!—that will caus someone as keen-witted as he to be suspicious. You might report to the said to be suspicious.

"It has," she answered.

"Oh, has it?" he swung around. But she was standing in the dimmest corner of the room and he could not see her expression. Or was she presenting him with the same smooth mask she assumed for her clients?

"ZAT has confessed—if you can call it that."

"Confessed? To what?"

"That the last-minute switch in the sending was its responsibility."

Kenric stepped away from the drape. "Do you know what you are saying?" he demanded. He did not want to believe her—it approached too near to an old fear of his, once long existing on the fringe of his thoughts. The fear that some day the computer would not be following the orders of men to achieve a solution but would begin working on its own.

"ZAT came to the conclusion that the oracle was not the key.

ZAT reports that the Kor-King needs the backing our operative could give. Knowing that, ZAT prepared a different sending—"

"So I was elected. Did Goddard know?"

"No one knew—until after you were sent. They then learned ZAT had arranged no recall."

"What!"

"The shift came by some circuit they can't trace—yet. And so you can't return safely. To try it might end in an abort. I presume you don't want to risk that."

"Of course not," he answered almost absently, trying to think out what ZAT had done to him. It was well in the realm of possibility that they would be a long time finding that circuit. ZAT could conceal it.

"Another thing," she said. "ZAT broke connections with me today when I was asking progress. Contact now will have to come from the other side if ZAT continues the break."

He was over the first shock, able to think steadily. "It's as if I volunteered for Permanent Agent. I think I'll have to see it that way."

"You take it well." She moved into the window light to stand watching him closely. The ravages of their days in the desert were largely gone from her face.

"No use calling down the wrath of any gods of Vallek on ZAT." He tried to laugh and found the sound he produced passable. "All right—I forget Creed Trapnell, and am truly Lord Kor Kenric. Well, there is plenty to do under that name."

"That being?"

"The Kor-King wants you in the family. Last night he gave me one of those straight talks of his. I can understand his concern. Yarakoma is hardly to be listed as a credit to the clan. He would like a hand in picking the next woman to be marriage-linked with the Kor blood."

Kenric grinned at her. Her face remained placid, but not her eyes. They glowed like orm ore. He moved toward her, and on the way he said:

"He's shrewd and he's right. I think I would set him up even against ZAT!"

Then he stopped talking, for a good reason.

П

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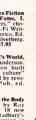
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