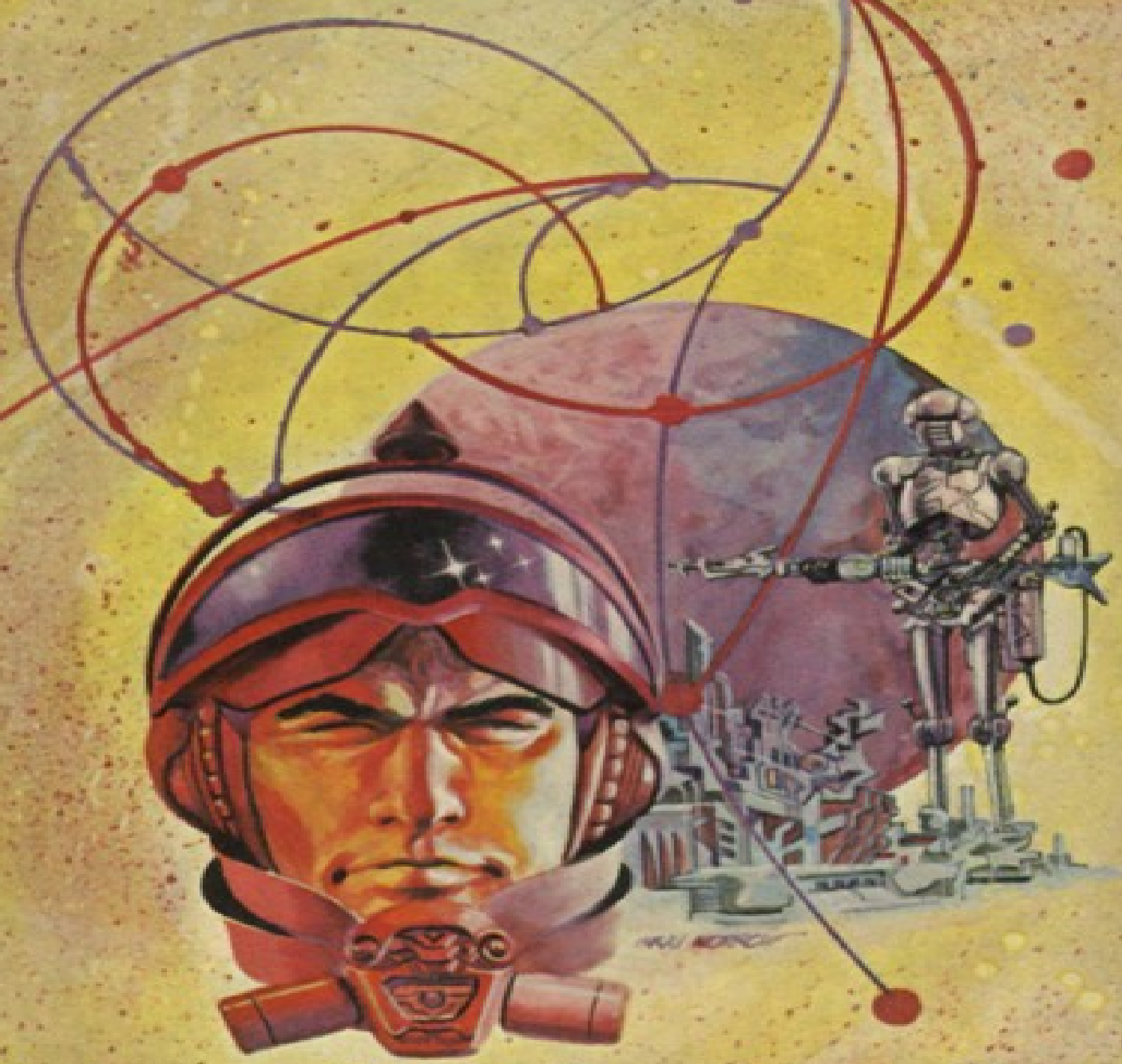


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Emil Petaja SEED OF THE DREAMERS



The heroes of the Earth must live again!

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Seed of the Dreamers by Emil Petaja

PROLOGUE

The mind-link complete, Cell 88881⁴ gave the proper cerebral salutation to his superior, High Cell 7², then downed vibration and awaited his instructions. He must not allow his impatience with time-honored formality to filter out; or, if it did, he must keep it at the absolute minimum.

*We of Yonder are one mind, when one mind suits.**

*"Yonder" is not, of course, the true logical name the mind-link race gives to its galaxy. Read on.

Truth is truth. Our ancient cells wandered in darkness and bewilderment, pondering out their stark individualisms, finding their way miraculously to the stars of Yonder, until the ways of Touching and Blending were revealed. From that time we were One. There was no further need for emotion. Absolute logic was achieved and, with it, all the stars within our galaxy.

Truth is truth, Cell 88881⁴. Truth is that absolute logic not achieved—not quite. We make no pretense to perfection. We doubt if there is such a thing anywhere in the totality of time and space. Nor is the untidiness of emotion entirely absent from our cells. Youthful cells express it in their impatience to reach out and do things which are beyond their capabilities or in vulgar displays associated with the ceremonies of fission.

We loathe all emotion. We are contemptuous of it. We stifle it within ourselves and weed it from our star seedlings as soon as they have reached cerebral maturity.

Truth is truth. Now, Cell 88881⁴, we must discuss the matter of your single-cell voyage of star seeding this new galaxy. You are one of our top seeders and yet—

I am the top star-seeder, if I may say so!

You may not say so. Furthermore, refrain from using the pronoun "I." It is both archaic and an embarrassment to The Mind. Were it not for mind-link and the knowledge, the technology, the science, the value judgments, which mind-link provides you on your voyages to these far stars for purposes of seeding them with future life-tools for The Mind, you—an individual cell of The Mind—would be nothing.

Truth is truth. Cell 88881⁴ begs forgiveness of all the cells of The Mind which have contributed to our providing more life-tools for the further expansion and everlasting glory of The Mind.

Well said, Cell 88881⁴. May we now be refreshed with the method of procedure.

Truth is truth. We encase Cell 88881⁴ within a protective dome-Well said. "We," inasmuch as Cell 88881⁴ could not do the casing, actually. Suitably housed for star flight, pre-nourished for the duration of the voyage. Proceed.

—provided with a sufficient quantity of life-stuff for the actual seeding, we embark. We land on the designated planet of the designated star. By mind-link with our technically oriented cells we ascertain which organisms actually extant on that planet have the best potential for survival and for cerebral domination of its other organisms. We select those life-forms and, using our life-stuff, we duplicate them. On occasion we are able to eliminate inimical biotics from their bodies before the exact duplication. The duplications are disseminated about the subject planet and Cell 88881⁴, who never actually leaves the protective dome, returns to The Mind, mission accomplished.

And in the fullness of time—The Mind can wait indefinitely—we return to that star to make use of our evolved tool. Our knowledge of its nature, of the totality of its being, makes The Mind its master. Master is not an exact term, of course. Being of The Mind and for The Mind is a privilege.

Truth is truth.

But remember, Cell 88881⁴, we are this time voyaging into a completely new galaxy, infinitely further than ever be-

fore. Mind-link has been fortified within Cell 88881⁴ and within all those cells associated with this utterly new project. There may be perils in this new galaxy, apart from the weakness of the link, which we have never before encountered. Caution must be a byword. There must be extreme caution and ingenuity.

And logic, Cell 7²—crystal clear logic which overshadows all other considerations. Trust m—

Ah-ah! The mind-link is ended. Logic be with you; and remember, Cell 88881⁴—

Yes, Cell 7²?

Never say "L"

1

His starcop night-run seemed routine enough. It was a bore, in fact, considering how weary he was already when the call came; he had been selected because his miniship was the only one of XDD-7 class there and ready. Brad had his own reasons for refusing to let some other cop take her, but it wasn't the usual finicky starship-starcop marriage.

Oh, well, mine not to reason toy. Star Control said do, you did, with no excuses, no if s, and's, or but's.

Slipping his ship into warp and then out, after swallowing two wake pills (the permissible efficiency limit), Brad viewed Sunnystar's raging night storm on the panel scope-vid with distaste. He flexed his wide shoulders. His lean handsomeness of feature (excepting a ragged, brown beard to hide the dimple in his chin he hated) twitched tight muscles around his dark, secretive eyes and wide but seldom-smiling mouth. There wasn't much to smile about for a solo, short-run cop at the thin end of nowhere. Sometimes when he took the trouble to trim his beard he surprised himself with what others must see when they looked at him: a tough, cynical, space-beat man, especially around the eyes and lips. He thought, *Old buddy, you're getting old, fast.*

What the hell. He shrugged. *You do your job, what else?*

Hunting for the beam-in light on the scope through an everlasting sandstorm, he shivered. There was a sinister, mindless madness about the way Sunnystar's perennial storms rearranged the landscape like some crazy exterior decorator. But it was just part of the planet's environment, like the snow peaks and the ancient volcanic canyons.

His eyes probed the latter for the wink of light that would guide him down to the landing area in livable shelter. Only the deepest, most protected canyons were capable of sustaining life of any kind.

Sunnystar.

Brad shivered. Somebody had a sense of humor; one of the older medics once told him about that name. It seems that long ago, back on Terra, somebody had the idea that, since institutions devoted to the care and feeding of psychot-ics inspired unpleasant emotions from their very existences, the least people could do was to give them pleasant names to remove a little of the stigma. There were Happy Home, Friendly Acres, Tranquil Valley, Sunnystar...

Sunnystar was no ordinary mental institution. When the first pioneers warped off their overpopulated seed-world three hundred and fifty years ago they confronted environments and situations to drive anybody crazy. They went crazy when they couldn't cope and there were places to put them.

But all that was gone. Man's incredible capacity to adjust over generations cut down the psychotic rate and kept him stubbornly and greedily plugging on and on.

They had been in Brad Mantee's bailiwick for the past nine years; they were at the fringe of the galaxy, where the pickings were lean indeed.

Why was there such an expensive mental hospital out here, why a complex buried at the bottom of the deepest canyon on Sunnystar, where the inmates and their warders lived like moles looking up at a narrow slit of dust-blackened sky?

There were reasons, although Brad and almost everybody else had nothing to say about it.

Man had reached the stars in a big way. But problems remained, the same kind of problems Earth had masochistically beat itself with, multiplied a millionfold: greed, war, violence. Space was a shambles impossible to police, too big and too complex. The push had moved on too fast.

The stars were up for grabs and, as usual, money was the key. The pioneers who died and went crazy found themselves shoved off their own homestead by financial manipulators or bandits who killed with no pretense

of legal right. One alternative was to join the wolf packs or set up your own robber baronage. The blood that had splattered the pages of Earth's history was sandbox play compared to the red tide of carnage the stars witnessed.

Aliens there were, many as bad or worse. It all added up to an inferno Dante never dreamed of.

Then Star Control had come with iron-fist rule. The habitable stars were thinly scattered; distances were so staggering, that out of sheer need, Star Control formed itself into a complex police machine which demanded instant obedience to its dicta, about which there was no possible protest. If it was fascist in nature, that was how it had to be to save the pieces. The galaxy had been in an intolerable situation. It was as simple as that. *You obeyed Star Control or you were out, with no place to go.*

Over the past hundred years of Star Control rule, the dictators of the stars themselves had taken on a fearful aspect. The pendulum had swung full right.

Starcop Brad Mantee was a cog in the great machine. It was no wonder his eyes took on an icy look.

Now those icy bits of flint glanced at his supine charge. Dr. Milton Lloyd was sedated and strapped in. The man had been already under restraint and sedated when Brad had picked him up at a top-secret science complex known as Project Yonder. At Project Yonder lived several hundred of the most important scientists and space engineers working on a means of penetrating another galaxy. What man had accomplished before was staggering; what he proposed to do now was unbelievable.

Dr. Milton Lloyd's frail, hunched form had remained in the same position since take-off. There was something pathetic about the way his wispy, white hair trailed down over his closed eyes. Brad had to remind himself of what Dr. Lloyd had done.

Why, for God's sake? Why would one of the sharpest minds in the galaxy crack—and kill? That was exactly what Dr. Lloyd had done. His life

with Project Yonder (as it indeed had been for decades, elsewhere) was coddled, serene and special. He had had beautifully faked surroundings, the best of food, the opportunity of working at his cerebral chores with an agreeable little army of his equals.

What made him create a situation which resulted in seventeen deaths?

Brad was only a cop, so naturally they gave him no details. Star Control was disinclined to permit questions or give answers. *Do your job and keep your irrelevant thoughts to yourself. The less one cog knows about the workings of the total machine the better.*

Brad's job was to remove Dr. Lloyd to Sunnystar, the super-secret planet at the jumping-off place where the addled Brains were housed. The patients were all important scientists, spies and other such people, whose hospitalization must never even be known by the general star population. Why? There still were outlaw groups here and there, there still were those within the star machine itself who were hungry for power. Addled or not, the Brains of Sunnystar might be of great value should a revolt against the restrictive clutch of Star Control ever occur.

It might. The pendulum must swing back sometime.

Sometimes Brad thought of Sunnystar as an *obliette* over the Bosphorus, where you dropped people who might rock the boat, men in iron masks. It was a galactic Chateau Dlf.

The laser wink showed; the small starship landed.

The round landing pad was some miles from the hospital complex itself. A railed ramp wound further down into the deep canyon, into darkness where faint lights glimmered.

Brad yawned, wondering where the ground crew and hospital conveyances were. Peering, he caught sight of another ship at the far end of the pad and a figure moving through the dark waving a torch.

Well, get going. Deposit your knocked-out cargo to Hospital Head Dr. Henderson, then shower, eat, and beddybye for ten hours. Hell, fifteen hours.

Brad lifted out of his cup and hiked the old scientist up on his back. Dr. Lloyd was small but the dead weight was not light to Brad in his present condition. He moved out of the small cockpit and triggered the hatch and ladder. He eased the sleeping man carefully down the ladder and let him slide down his legs onto the pad while he scowled a-round for help.

No *help*.

Damn! What is this?

The ramp winding down to the dim forebuilding lights was empty and dark. Above him the storm howled.

Above the roaring storm Brad heard a sharp cry. It was the figure with the torch, running toward him from that other miniship. It was a girl. *A girl! On ugly Sunny star!*

A glance at that other ship made him start. It bore a civilian SS number. *Lord! Who in the galaxy could have possibly found his—her—way to this miserable outpost? What for?* It made so little sense that Brad had a sudden giddy notion that the feared revolution had indeed started.

He touched the laser blast on his belt and waited for her to reach him.

That uniform she wore! His ship's downbeam tinged it deep brown with a big, red heart on it where hearts are generally assumed to be.

"One of *them!*" Brad groaned. "Lord! How in the name of Apollo did one of *them* make it out here?"

The girl panted up to him, staring at Dr. Lloyd. "I knew it was him! I *knew!*"

"How did you know?" Brad grumbled. "And where in the hell are the attendants and the ambulance?"

Her anxious eyes were only for the little scientist, slumped down on Brad's boots.

"What did you do to him?" she wailed.

"Not a damn thing, Bleeding Heart. What was done was done before I got him, and for good reason." His irritation with her extended itself in the direction of the distant down-ramp glow. "Where are they? Dr. Henderson was notified hours ago, the sour old bastard!"

"I agree with that, anyway," the girl said. "He is a complete bastard, not to mention a tyrant. He runs Sunnystar like a military prison."

Brad frowned down at her trim tunicked shape. There was a hot gleam in her green eyes and her chin was up-tilted. She was pretty. *Feisty, too*. He experienced a wave of acute physical hunger. Star Control didn't admit such hungers existed.

The girl's pretty face shone with defiance; there was challenge and something bordering on hate in the tightness of her lips and the hint of contempt for his uniform, if not for him.

"What in blazes are you doing on Sunnystar, Love Dove?"

"I've been waiting here three days. I knew my~I knew Dr. Lloyd would be here."

"How could you know that three days ago?"

"Never mind. I knew. Henderson gave me a cubicle in the receiving ward to sleep in, but I never got to so much as poke my nose into the main hospital."

"I'm not surprised, the way you bleeding hearts carry on."

She was crouching down, cradling Dr. Lloyd's head in her arms and stroking the hair out of his eyes. She flashed Brad a message of hate for all he stood for.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself? A sick old man who has been squeezed dry and then thrown in the discard!"

"Lord—"

"Did you have to knock him out, you fiend?"

"I told you I didn't. The meds did, after he killed—balls of fire, what am I doing, explaining this to a nitwit like you? Where *are* they?"

He moved away from her toward the ramp. "Where are they, for—"

"They just might be hunting for me," she giggled. "I gave them the slip—made it look as if I'd got past the guards into the hospital wards."

Brad swore. "And now I'm supposed to pack Dr. Lloyd two miles down—" He turned while he talked. "Hey! What are you doing?"

She had a small med kit out; a hypo was already coming out of the old man's bare arm.

"Helping you," she said calmly. "Nullifying the drug. Now he can walk to the hospital on his own."

"Listen, you stupid little—"

"I know all about your precious rules. I'm a qualified nurse. Don't worry. Where can he escape to?"

There was nothing to do but to make it look as if Brad himself had administered the antidote. Since there were no attendants and no ambulance, there was a certain logic to it. But Dr. Henderson was a martinet and the breach would most certainly be reported to Brad's superiors.

"Damn you! Damn all you dogooder hearts!"

He brushed her off and lifted Dr. Lloyd on his feet. The scientist fell hard against him, gasping and gulping, but already he was snapping to. Brad felt a rush of sympathy for the man shuddering awake in his arms. His anger cooled a little. Whatever nitwit tendencies the girl had, she had courage along with it. *Coming here, braving Dr. Henderson and his handpicked dragons, taking it upon herself to bring Dr. Lloyd out of his drugged sleep.*

The scientist's eyes fluttered open. He took one look at Brad and his dark-blue uniform with the phosphorescent insignia, and he wrenched away. He gave a pitiful fling of his head to see where he was. When Brad tried to take hold of his arm to steady him, the old man gave him a wild backward shove.

"Leave him alone," the girl cried.

"Hell hurt himself," Brad told her. "I'm responsible. Can't you get that through your head?"

"Would you care?"

It was during this challenge that it happened. It was impossible, but it happened. Even while it happened, in a kind of time-stopping limbo, Brad refused to believe it.

Dr. Milton Lloyd's rest must have done him a world of good and the antidote did contain a shot of something like meratran. When Brad walked to him he hit the cop full in the face with a surprisingly aggressive blow. Brad staggered back and reached involuntarily for his laser blast.

No! It can't be!

It was.

Dr. Lloyd ran for the ship's ladder and when Brad desperately pointed the laser blast at him the girl jumped in front. She tumbled onto Brad, and stayed there, screaming, putting her body over the muzzle of his blaster.

Brad swore and twisted, overtaken by the gut-wrenching agony of having his perfect record with Star Control smashed by a girl and a frail old man. The controlled fury of his starship's burn blew him back as the ship lifted, hovered briefly within a downthrusting ball of red lightning and then vanished into the unseen stars.

2

Brad considered beating her; it would help his ego. But it would not help the total situation. He started chewing her out with all the salty idioms at his command. It didn't help. She just stood there, taking it, wide-eyed, contrite but defiant.

"I didn't do it deliberately," she breathed when he was finished. "Please don't think that"

"Shut up."

"I couldn't let you *kill* him!"

"Why not?" Brad snarled. "He killed seventeen astro-testees."

"Are you sure?"

"I believe what I'm told. What's your excuse?"

"For one thing, Dr. Lloyd's my father."

Brad blinked. "Hell, I don't believe it. He's not even married."

"He *was*. My mother died. He was out on assignment when I was born; he didn't even know. Shuttled around from one star to another, always farther and farther away, he never did find out. I've never even seen him before— no recent picture, even."

"SC keeps the big ones under wraps." Brad studied her. He now looked at her as an unhappy girl trailing after her unknown father, not as a bleeding heart nuisance and an enemy of all he was sworn to uphold. "That's why you joined the hearts, to find your father?"

She nodded.

"In a way, yes. But I believe in them, too. All they want to do is help patch up some of the wounds your precious SC leaves behind. Star Control's too inhuman, don't you see that? It's too unfeeling, too grim."

"Got to be," Brad said. It was a rote lesson well learned. "You know how it was before: chaos, total and complete. SC's got to be tough. It's the only way to keep things in order. Can't you and your love doves see that?"

"We think the time has come for a change. Hadn't it ever occurred to you *why* great minds like Dr. Milton Lloyd snap off? They're driven too far and for all the wrong reasons. What's the point in all this pushing forward if there isn't any individual happiness at the end of it? It's like a horrible machine—on and on and on—for *what*?"

Brad shrugged and scowled up into the flailing storm high over their heads.

"Stop your babbling and let me think!"

She sighed. "I know; believe me, I do know. It was your job to bring Dr. Lloyd here and now he has escaped."

"In my ship! What if he gets picked up by one of the elusive outlaw packs we know are out there? What if he lets them con him into helping them start an all-out revolution? There are quite a few would-be Hitlers just waiting for the chance to mess things up. SC's all set for the next big jump."

"What are you going to do?"

He gave her a look.

"Commandeer your boat and go after Lloyd. What else can I do? Do you realize that this is the first time, the very first time! Nine years, the first time!"

"Sorry to spoil such a glorious record—"

"Shut up and help me ready your SS. Luckily it's one of our own early models." He gave a crisp look down the ramp toward the hospital. Hospital personnel were coming toward the pad. "Can't wait for permission. Halverson's such a stickler for going by the book. Can't waste time. Besides — hell, never mind! C'mon!"

He grabbed her arm.

There wasn't time before and during the lift for conversation. Brad grinned inwardly at the girl's wordless efficiency. *These hearts must, have something besides currant jelly in their veins. Somehow they make themselves felt among the lonely stars and still manage to keep Star Control from cutting them up into little paper-doll pieces. How? A cockeyed combination of innocuousness and high purpose?*

Eventually Brad caught a feeble glimpse of their quarry in the vid; he let the wires in his nerves uncurl a little. His eyes began to droop.

"You need sleep," she said, as if it were an order.

"Can you handle it?"

"It's my ship, remember. I've been tailing after my daddy for half my life, it seems."

"But how in the—"

"Never mind. Sleep!"

"In a minute. You know, I didn't think SC ever permitted the top-level eggheads to get married. Frowns on close ties: total dedication to duty and all that."

"My father and mother were married secretly."

"Maybe they weren't married."

Her cheeks grew rosy. "Maybe not. That was twenty-four years ago and they loved each other dearly. My mother died when I was five and forever after my dream was to find my father and—" She broke off. "I suppose you think that's silly and stupid."

"Maybe not. I never had any parents to speak of. They were killed when I was two or three, don't know exactly. Anyway, SC training's about all the family I ever had."

"Sounds terribly lonely."

Brad shrugged.

"No close friends?"

"Well, yes, in a way. I—never mind."

She flashed him an odd smile.

"Secrets?"

"None of your business. Sure you can handle this? Keep him tagged on the bion-eye?"

"Sure I'm sure."

Brad rechecked the coordinates on the computer. Dr.

Lloyd obviously knew what he was doing; he would naturally move away from the SC webs of communication. That cut down his probable course by three-quarters. With two-thirds of the rest showing impossible features such as novas and galactic storm regions, the trajectory was further narrowed. She ought to be able to handle it, and she was. almost as anxious as he was to find Dr. Lloyd. *

He yawned.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"Harriet."

"Right. Goodnight, Harriet Lloyd."

"G'night, Brad."

He slept like a baby.

Time flung by while they trailed the elusive bleep. They talked; mostly they argued about the irreconcilable differences between Star Control and individual freedom of action and incentive.

"Tell me about the love doves," he suggested.

"Please don't use that expression."

"What then, bleeding hearts?"

She wrinkled her attractive nose. "We do have a respectable title."

"Never heard it." He added wickedly, "I heard a lot of juicy ones, though."

"I'm sure you did. That's because, try as hard as we do, we make trouble for SC locals sometimes."

"*Sometimes!* Stirring up primms, rekindling revolutions when we've just barely managed to bring things into line, giving vicious outlaws and predators the notion that they're misunderstood babies!"

"We don't do that—at least not deliberately."

"It comes out that way. Give 'em an inch and—hell! What *is* your title?"

"The Universal Foundation of Friendship."

"TUFF," Brad grinned. "Takes the place of the formal religions that got shoved in the ash can somewhere along the way."

Harriet nodded sadly. "The Foundation was started after the appalling Centauri massacre—"

"Let's not go back to ancient history. One of the chiefs flipped when his wife and children were—never mind. It's a wicked page all right, but it did slash through wholesale pandemonium and let 'em know SC was for sure." He gave a stormy squint into the thinly powdered blacks.

"Our main dynamic is reeducation." Her voice took on a gentle, persuasive note. "We are not *bleeding hearts*. We don't rush to the deftnse of convicted horrors; we do not interfere. We mostly just trail along behind your juggernauts doing our best to let bewildered prims and harassed farmers know that beyond their heavy work-load somebody cares about them. We're only trying to bring back some humanity to the human race."

Brad made a quizzical face and shrugged. After a long moment he said, "Tell me about you and your father. I mean, how did you manage to track him to Sunnystar? Didn't you realize how dangerous it was, dropping in on Henderson like that? Sunnystar's verboten to everybody but SC's with specific business out here."

She laughed. "I realize. It isn't the first chance like that I've taken of being scragged. For one thing, we hearts blare our ID's loud and heavy on the bionics readers. I use my sex quite mercilessly, too. Nobody's going to shoot down a poor defenseless female!"

"No? You don't know Dr. Henderson. You don't even know SC, apparently. Females of the species rate just what males get. You were damn-fool lucky, is what you were."

"Yes. I've been—lucky."

He gave her a narrow glance. "What do you mean by that? You mean you just *guessed* Dr. Lloyd was about to be hauled off to Sunnystar, days before the, uh, trouble at Project Yonder even happened?"

The girl stared bleakly into the fore-vid. When she gave an involuntary shiver Brad knew what she was sensing. There was an unutterable loneliness about trekking the star wastes, here more than anywhere man had ever dared, because it was so near the jumping-off place. Harriet Lloyd's presumptuous years of seeking her unknowing father among all those bright specks were something like Brad's own lonely years of driving on and on and on. *Well, at least she has*

purpose to her insanity. Brad wasn't sure there was any to his. Somebody had pushed a stud in his back and said, "Go, man!" Harriet had a goal. Suddenly, for an overwhelming minute, he wanted fiercely that she should make it.

"Well?" he prompted gently.

She gave her head a fast little shake, as if to put her ideas into their proper position.

"I don't know quite how to say this."

He shrugged. "Just say it; I won't bite."

She smiled. "How are you on ESP, that sort of thing?"

"We had the usual briefings and tests back at SC Training Academy. I've done some extracurricular reading on precognition, kinetics, stuff like that. It's pretty obvious that we're heading in that direction. The potentials are increasing: telepathy, for instance, only I haven't got any."

"I have," she said simply.

He whistled. "Congratulations." When the implications hit home he whistled again. "You mean, ESP is what has been pulling you to your father all these years?"

Harriet nodded.

"I—I think so. They say that within the DNAs of each of our individual cells we have microscopic replicas of all our parents and grandfathers and so on were: like red hair, buck teeth, whatever. This must include whatever ESP factors they possessed, too, which means a sort of preternatural overlapping. It's the explanation for a mother knowing it when her son dies violently parsecs away and even how an expectant father feels labor pains.

"When I was a child I was so lonely I wanted to die. I was placed in an orphanage after mother went. Sometimes I would look up at the stars and wonder which one was my father. That's the way I thought of it. One of those stars *was* my father; and, you know, sometimes I *knew which one was!*"

Brad pushed out a long slow breath of air.

"And that made you decide to come up here and find him when you grew up."

Harriet smiled crookedly. "Terribly sentimental, no? But try to see. You were an orphan; you had nobody, only tough Star Control. But if there *had* been somebody—"

Brad gave a vigorous shrug. He didn't like this kind of talk; he never had. It worried at slammed doors in his mind. He didn't like the way Harriet was looking at him, either.

"See that fleck of a sun over there in quadrant G-88? He must be heading there. There's no place else on the charts; even that sun's not on the charts."

"They say desperate circumstances help," Harriet went on softly. "I mean, the telepathic contact is strongest between parents and sibs when death is imminent. It relates to survival, I guess. My father thought he was going to die after—what happened. He knew they were taking him to Sunnystar, and suddenly I knew. I was in warp and that's why—" She gave him a glazed, tight look. "These are desperate circumstances, too, aren't they? Father knows starships and astro-navigation after a lifetime in space.

He invented some of the techniques. But he's sick; the lift the antidote gave him must be wearing off by now. He'll have to land on the first planet he finds, no matter what. I've got to get to him! I've got to! *Father!*"

"I've got to get him, too," Brad reminded her grimly.

She flashed him a wild tearful look.

There was defiance, even hatred, in that look.

Starcop Bradley Mantee was Control's unfeeling robot.

3

Their eyes remained glued to the reluctant bleep until it was swallowed up by a small, uncharted sun. Brad now took time to ask the computer about the star and directed snatch readers to inform him on its planets, if any. Inasmuch as the system was unexplored and uncharted, the bank had little to offer. The reader gave it one small planet about the size of Earth. Indications were strong that the planet was still new and primitive.

"That's a break," Brad remarked. "Could have been a dozen suns and fifty planets to dig through."

"I don't like your use of the word *dig*." Harriet's face was a mask of worry. "Do you think he managed a landing? Look!"

The planet was deeply shrouded in wet, black clouds.

"It won't be easy for him or us. I do like just a hint in the scope to see I'm not setting down on an ice pick or—"

"Or on the Bad Witch of the North?"

He gave her an odd grin and started to say something, but then dropped it. For one thing, he was busy orbit-skimming the monotonous blanket that bundled the planet they must land on soon, whether it was good, bad or indifferent. There was no hope of locating a wayward ship under that; even the bionics reader, which could detect and advise of mind-life within a wide radius, had nothing useful to offer.

Dr. Lloyd could have crashed. Weak and slow of reflex as he was, the prospect of burning down to a safe landing would have to include several miracles. Brad didn't say anything to Harriet about this, or show it while he keyed the instruments toward their own precarious landfall.

Harriet knew that her father's chances were extremely bad, but she didn't show it. She snapped to and followed his wordless cues with over-

bright eyes and set, dry lips.

They set down at an oblique angle, but on firm ground.

"My impulse right now," Harriet gulped, "is to just stay right here in the ship. We're safe here from witches and whatever; we've got everything we need for the nonce."

"Just what have we got to help us on a tropical prim planet like mother used to be a few million years ago? Let's find out."

Harriet showed him. There were the usual survival items, such as hand tools, capsule food and portable shelters: the works, as far as basics were concerned. Harriet's green eyes flashed pride in TUFF for being so resourceful and efficient.

"What about weapons?" Brad grunted.

"Weapons?"

"Of course! I've got my l.b. but the ammo packs won't last long. Don't worry, I'm not going to kill anybody—not unless they try to kill us first. It does happen."

"Savages, wild beasts." Harriet gulped. "I *know*. I'm not a complete fool." She dragged out a laser rifle and an ancient side arm. "See?"

They were all but rusted from having lain in their holders for at least a year. There was little ammunition. Brad shrugged while he loaded his back pack and directed the loading of Harriet's. He squinted at the ring of fern trees beyond the clearing they'd landed in. The trees, like the rest of the small planet, were shrouded in fog, which gave the pterido-phyte wall an inimical appearance, as if the forest was sure to harbor huge and horrible monsters.

"We're lucky at that, maybe Dr. Lloyd, too. At least the atmosphere's right and Lord knows there's plenty of water, oceans of it, probably. And

with all that vegetation, we're sure to eat." He activated the door and ladder. "Shall we have a look?"

Harriet was staring hard at the instruments on the panel.

"Brad."

"Yeah?"

"We have problems."

"Don't I-" He whirled. "What now?*"

"No fuel."

"What in-"

"Oh, enough to lift us off, but remember what a long way we've got to go before we reach anywhere."

Brad checked, rechecked and grunted. "Just like a—" He shrugged and pulled her toward the hatch. "We better hunt up your daddy and my ship fast, and pray while we're hunting that my reserve's intact."

His first move outside was to check the spider legs and cups to make sure they were more firmly anchored than the lopsided angle of tilt indicated. Then there was the auto-shield to set up around the ship against animal invasion. He gave up the idea of sterilizing themselves completely against inimical local biotics; they had both had their biannual shots and that would have to do. The ship was another matter, however; it must remain inviolate, protected from all manner of hazard, meteorological, biological or chemical.

When he had finished the routine SC precautions he moved to the edge of the fern forest where he found Harriet toying with a huge, tropical butterfly. The insect was electric blue in color; it fluttered around her gloved hands.

"Look, Brad!"

"I see it, I see it. Garish beggar."

"No, I mean—look closer! Around its head!"

"Ah. That kind of nimbus of greenish specks."

"Emerald halo," Harriet corrected.

"All right, so I'm not poetic. Even if I do read—" He switched quickly back to the phenomenon of the dainty band of coruscating flecks which the butterfly wore as a kind of mobile coronet. "They are odd at that. I wonder...*

"Me, too. Are they alive?"

"I don't think so. Could be, though. Some kind of symbiosis, I guess. C'mon, let's get going!"

Brad kept his ears and eyes alert as they moved into the ferny forest. It was too misty to see more than a few yards ahead of them and the fronds were thickening. Still, it was easy going after they reached the summit of the low rise. The ground was springy with moss and dead fronds; there was a pungent odor to the rotting vegetation, which was not too unpleasant. There were low places where the omnipresent damp became hidden pools which had to be watched for and skirted.

Brad kept Harriet behind him and pulled out his torch when the enormous green-blue plants hid an already gloomy, mauve sky. He wondered about animals and listened for evidence of them; if there were predators, the thicket would be a likely place to find them.

His prim-planet experience had taught him that *not* hearing their stealthy paddings and rustlings could be lethal; beasts and savages on the prowl don't telegraph their presences. They wait, watch and pounce.

"Where are they?" Harriet wondered, panting to keep pace with Brad's generous strides.

"They? You mean animals?"

"There was that butterfly, and I've glimpsed some others: dragonflies and like that."

"Insects come early in the game," Brad said. "I'd say there are fish here, or aquatic life of some kind. As to four-leggers, mammals and so on, maybe not. This is a very primitive planet. So far as sophisticated life-forms go, there probably aren't any, besides us. It's wild, virgin."

"Virgin," Harriet mused. "Virgo. That's my zodiac sign, did you know?"

"How could I? Don't tell me you believe in astrology!"

"Um—not exactly. I just like the idea of it. Since we're the first two thinking animals to set foot on it, mind if I christen this little planet Virgo?"

"Be my guest." Brad laughed. "There's plenty of water."

"Thanks. Sorry, Virgo; excuse us, please."

"What's all that about?"

"I'm apologizing to Virgo for desecrating her virginity by belching down on her in a great spurt of fire, and now for tramping through her beautiful virgin forests."

Brad grinned.

"You're funny."

"Thanks."

"Funny and sensitive. You think with your emotions, like all girls."

"You don't have any feelings, of course. Star Control knocked all your capacity for emotion and sensitivity to beauty out of you years ago. Right?"

"Right!"

They tramped on.

"Brad."

"Now what?"

"You're a fraud."

He shrugged.

"Yes, you are. I know something about you that you don't know I know."

"I doubt it."

"Yes, I do. You let it slip several times on the ship. You gave out with several literary references, from books *not* on SC's approved list!"

"I don't know what you mean." His mouth quirked a half-smile, while his eyebrows puckered a frown.

"Sure you do; I'm not so dumb. You, Starcop Bradley Mantee, are a *reader!*"

He stopped in mid-stride and turned.

"Starmen in outland areas read. It's handier than the micros, which are not always easy to come by."

"You're talking about technical stuff. I'm talking about fiction: beautiful ancient novels about gorgeous heroes and glamorous girls to be rescued, all those magnificent books in the dwindled libraries, which SC finally burned

and disintegrated because they keep people dreaming fantastic dreams instead of doing their jobs."

"Like you said." Brad shrugged. "SC destroyed all the fiction books more than a century ago, what there was left. Nobody writes them anymore and might get in trouble if they tried. There's too much to do these days, too much hard-core reality to contend with, to sit around dreaming up phony situations on phony worlds."

Harriet laughed.

"You're talking right out of the SC bible, and yet you know as well as I do that some of those wonderful, ancient books still exist on far-out colonies—a very, very few, thanks to SC taboos and the natural processes of decay. It's my guess that you not only have read some forbidden books, but that you actually own some, that you find solace in them from the grimness and loneliness of—"

"Will you shut up? Please? You don't know what you're talking about!"

"All right, I'll shut up. But, if by some chance, another SC craft was to find your starship..."

Brad swore. He muttered something about her giving her ESP a rest—and her overblown soap-opera imagination.

He sloughed on, increasing his speed.

If they should find my ship and that secret shelf. If they should ...

There were no traces of any path to follow. Certainly those flying insects with what Harriet had called emerald halos left no evidence of their meanderings save for the pupae nested under leafs of huge brilliant-flowered shrubs and the neat nibble holes left by larvae. The rank floor of the forest, as far as they could see, had never experienced the tread of mammalian feet leaving irregular puddles in their wake.

Harriet made little sounds of awe and delight at the alien beauty of the wood. It was like a garden. Brad undamped a cutting tool from his belt when the going got tough and slashed a way through.

He was annoyed with her guessing about the books. It was not only because they were forbidden. From childhood, Brad had been trained against emotionalism and flights of fantasy or whimsy. None of it was germane to the hard-headed job he had picked for himself very early. On a routine check-mission involving a planetary prospector, a loner, Brad had found the man dead by natural causes. The old man had been sitting up in his hermitage (in a self-made rocking chair) with a book in his lap when death came. He had been smiling.

It was a book with pictures in it: *Treasure Island*. It was about a ldd and an old, one-legged pirate and a parrot shrieking, "Pieces of eight! Pieces of eight!"

Brad took the books along because they were so ancient and curious and because that was all there was. It was evident from the loner's well-used belongings that he had fancied himself some kind of adventurer, a seeker after fortune on strange island-worlds even more wonderful than the ones Robert Louis Stevenson had conjured up. He had not found any treasure, but there was an odd, contented smile on his face and a happy, unfulfilled dream frozen in his ancient eyes.

Brad took the books; somehow he forgot to turn them in. He had read *Treasure Island* and he was halfway through *Count of Monte Cristo*. He planned to "remember" them after he'd perused them all on his lonely treks; eventually they would be destroyed by SC's censorship force, like all the others.

There weren't many, about twenty altogether. They were ragged and dog-eared; there were pages missing in some. Brad had skillfully hidden them in one of the storage bunkers of his ship, behind an oblong of metal that exactly matched the hull.

He scarcely knew what made him do it. He had read them over and over until some of those daring heroes were far more real to him than his superiors or even those few, scattered, starcop friends he had made over the years.

All he knew was that they helped.

Oh, how they helped.

Those long-dead dreamers of exciting, noble, adventurous dreams could never have guessed how much.

4

The pteridophyte became all but impenetrable. In a couple of instances Brad had to use his l.b. and some of their meager supply of ammunition to blast their way through.

Uncomplaining Harriet trundled along, keeping pace. Once she tried to match Brad's leap over a miasmic sump and didn't make it. Brad went back and reached down a hand to haul her out of the water. He grinned and carried her to a clearing where a spine of volcanic rock thrust back the Jungle. He was surprised how light she was and how pleasant her nearness felt. It had been a long time since he'd been this close to any woman. Mostly his attachments had been casual, mechanical, and of brief duration. It was not their fault, always, nor his; it was the nature of his job. He was always here tonight and halfway to infinity tomorrow.

He'd purposely chilled his feelings for *them*.

Placing her gently on the black outcropping of rock, he told himself he'd better cool it with Harriet as well. There was no use starting something that could get them nothing but trouble. By the complexities of their lives and the exigences of space life under SC, they were, if not enemies, certainly incompatible. *In those ancient novels a situation like this could have been contrived to come out sweet and rosy.*

But not now, not for real. Not with SC calling all the shots.

"May I have a drink?" Harriet asked after she had done what she could about mopping off her tunic and her face.

"I thought you just did."

"Please. You weren't much help back there; you should have helped me before, not after."

He tossed her a canteen and smiled by way of apology.

"Thanks. We might as well rest here and eat."

"Sure." He helped her remove her pack and dug out sealed tins of paste food for them both. It had been discovered a long time back that, while capsules provided adequate nourishment for human survival, bulk was an important factor.

Because the paste food was virtually tasteless, Brad gave a wry look around them for some of the fruit trees he had noticed among the phantasmagoric blossoms. Harriet leaned back on her pack with a sigh while she nibbled solemnly.

"Shall we try some of those big yellow jobs?" He pointed.

"If you do the climbing. I've had it for now."

When Brad got back with an armful of the mangolike fruit, Harriet was fast asleep. Brad gave one of the fruits a fast standard test, which it more than passed. He ate three, wiped his beard off and then lay back on his cupped palms for a doze.

Training told him it would be imprudent for both of them to indulge in full sleep at the same time; so, weary though he was from their four-hour trek, he kept one eye open. He watched the cloud-muted sun sift through the lacey fern trees; it was slightly past its zenith. They'd have to find something better by way of defensible shelter before nightfall than this hump of basalt. They would need some place where their backs would be up against something solid at least. They hadn't seen anything yet that looked dangerous, but that wasn't any reason to assume nothing deadly existed. The area they had covered so far was very small; there could be something hungry waiting for them around the next bend.

Brad glanced at Harriet.

She was curled up like a child, vulnerable, not only to the alien environment and its perils, but to Brad. He stared at her with growing want; he wrenched his lusty look away and forced other thoughts.

"Brad."

She wakened him gently; her dark, lustrous hair brushed his cheek. He wrinkled his nose, yawned and then sat up fast, guilty and a bit sheepish.

"It's all right. I woke up when you tuned up."

"Tuned—I don't snore!"

"Don't you? All right, you don't snore. It was the wind in the branches."

He grunted and looked around the rock. All seemed peaceful, but the cloud-shy sun had descended beneath the level of the fringe of ferns at their back; nebulous shadows were elongating.

"Brad, I had this dream. It woke me, it was so strong."

"What dream?"

"Father, calling me."

"Your ESP again. But he doesn't know you exist, remember?"

"Maybe not. But all the same, he said—that way!"

Brad frowned. It was not the easiest way and not the way he had decided on. For one thing, there was a precipitous hill to climb some two hundred yards distant with night coming on.

He pointed that out. "Are you sure?"

She nodded vehemently. She was already on her feet, her long, luscious legs looming. She crouched and slipped on her pack, still nodding. "I'm sure. Trust me."

"Could be a psychic doppelganger leading us astray," he grumbled. But when she leaped easily off the rock he strapped on his own, larger pack and moved after her without further demur.

When it became dark with tropical suddenness, halfway up the mountain, Brad decided that was as good a spot as any to pass the hours until sunrise. There were no animal trails, however dim; and, with a natural curve of solid rock at their backs and a sheer drop in front of them, an undisturbed night seemed a reasonable assumption. They slept.

The valley the sun presented them when they reached the summit and looked down the other side, was wide and long and verdantly inviting. Among the mammoth, blue-green ferns were laeoy, silver-needed conifers and broad leaf trees with sturdy oaklike trunks and lofty patches of deep green branches like the pictures Brad had seen in the book about Robin Hood.

"Gorgeous!" Harriet clapped her hands in childish delight.

"Not bad. Still, there is one thing."

"What?"

"The evergreens and the oaks—maybe Virgo is a bit less primitive than we figured."

"What exactly does that mean?"

"For one thing, four-leggers: beasts, primitive man-types, maybe. Well, one thing, we might snag some game food. We could use it."

"You mean you would kill—"

"We're on that kind of world," Brad pointed out. "And we are meat eaters; at least I am."

"What about primitive man-types?"

Brad grinned. "No thanks. But *they* might not be quite so squeamish."

They moved down. The slope was gradually and the going easy. When they reached the first of the oaklike trees Brad put his hand on the butt of

his l.b. and kept it there. When Harriet flung forward to embrace a vivid host of scarlet flowers he shouted her back.

"Can't I pick even one?"

"Better not. The fragrance they spill out's very heavy, might even be an hallucinatory drug. That's all I need: a tuned-on female."

"Very well, spoilsport."

"Later."

"As you say, Officer. But *I—Brad, look!*"

He had already seen. He pulled her back behind a cover of ground brush and crouched there. Along a natural trail like a dried creek bed moved a group of natives. They were tall, muscular blacks with ivory rings in their ears and with plumed headdresses. They carried primitive spears and some hauled along fur-bearing forest animals between them on poles.

"What are they?" Harriet breathed.

"Hunters, at least some of them. But more of them look like tribal warriors. Lord, it's as if I'd seen them before someplace!"

"Natives like them on another prim?"

Brad shook his head. "Never."

"Anyway, they haven't seen us yet."

"But the way you yelled out—" The shadows falling on them from behind said it better. "We've had it, baby; hang close to. We'll try the friendship bit before this." He put his hand on the blaster at his hip when he rose and turned.

The incredibly tall and incredibly familiar blacks behind them (the spears they held were most persuasive) ushered them to the front of the

entourage, to the tallest of all, the one with many necklaces and a lacquered ebony feather-headdress.

"Greetings," Brad said, with a passable grin.

"Greetings." The Chief nodded. For some reason he appeared hopeful, and the others were gesticulating among themselves and pointing at them with evident satisfaction.

Peculiarly, Brad was not surprised that the Chief spoke a language he understood passably. It matched the mysterious familiarity of the whole situation. Harriet clung close; they waited.

"Whence come ye?" the Chief asked. "And why are your faces white?"

Brad's muscles unknotted and he was able to grin up at the seven-foot man, whose high plumes bobbed with a kind of amiable dignity.

"We are strangers. We come from over the mountains." He jerked his thumb back to indicate this.

The Chiefs handsome, black face twisted.

"Ye lie. No strangers can cross the mountains where all things die. But no matter; ye are strangers, and no strangers may live in the land of the Kukuanas. Prepare to die, O strangers!"

Harriet cried out and clung harder. Brad tried to pull out his blaster, but something deep in his mind said no. *I mustn't. I don't have a blaster. There are no l.bs.* The spears were beginning to move in on them; the blades were being removed from twists of vine the warriors had for belts.

"They're going to kill us," Harriet wailed. "That much I can believe. But who are they, Brad? *Who are they?*"

"Let's find out. Chief-"

"My name is Infadoos. But you knew that already?" The mahogany face studied Brad, as it seemed, with solemn hope.

"Infadoos! Of the Kukuanas! Beyond the Mountains of Sulimen, the mountains called Sheba's Breasts!"

The plumes bobbed. The white teeth showed in a wide grin.

"What is all this!" Harriet begged. "Brad!"

"I don't know, baby; how can I believe what is impossible? Maybe the fragrance of all those flowers *was* hallucinatory! But why are both of us seeing the same thing? This is out of *my* mind, not yours!"

"Brad—"

"Something in Chief Infadoos' eyes demands that I understand all of this; therefore, I do. Otherwise we'll get scragged."

"Scragged?" Harriet wailed.

Chief Infadoos held up a hand for the warriors to stay their weapons while he moved in and gave Harriet a penetrating stare. He seemed disappointed.

"Show teeth," he ordered.

Harriet obeyed.

"All there." Infadoos shook his head. "Not good. Take teeth out, please."

"Brad—"

"He thinks they are the take-out kind." He moved a little between the Chief and the girl. "Sorry, Infadoos."

"No good," The Chief shook his head vehemently. "Good must have hair growing on one side. Eyes are not right. One must come out, like teeth.

Then you may not be killed." He made the signal for the warriors to go ahead.

"Wait! Listen, Infadoos! I know Good isn't the way you expected him to be. But I have other things to startle and astonish you. Watch!"

He whipped out the blaster, aimed it at a small rodent-like animal running out of the brush. Invisible fire leaped. The rodent leaped up in a blaze of blue-white fire.

The warriors yelled out in amazement and approval.

Infadoos showed his white teeth again.

"Truely, your magic tube is of the Word. You may live."

"Thanks, Infadoos. And my woman?"

The muscular ebony shoulders shrugged. "Since she is your chattel, she may live, too. Kukuana warriors can't waste their strength on slaves. But there are many things not of the Word besides her."

"I know. There were supposed to be four of us, right? Well, the other two died from exposure and dehydration, coming over the impassable mountains. You understand how that could happen, Infadoos?"

The Chief nodded.

"Of course. But this is not the True Word. We seek fulfillment of the True Word."

Brad's head was dizzy with unbelief, but there was nothing to do but to persuade Infadoos that they were truly of the Word. That much his mind was able to grasp.

"We are children of the stars."

"That is true, if you are of the Word. You, anyway, Master of the thunder that roars and slays from afar. Come! We will lead you to the place of the king. *Room, koom!*"

Brad gasped, then grabbed bits out of his unconscious mind's stores. "Your King's name is Twala!"

"Of course. Only our king can guide you across all the further dangers which you will encounter on the path to the treasure chamber."

"Solomon's lost treasure!"

"Yea. According to the True Word we must help you. The way to the treasure *is* long; many will die. Yet time will be when Gagool will bid the white lords break the seals and take what they wish from the chests in the great caves. Others will be killed in horrible ways, but you will live. You will carry a purse of shining stones called diamonds out of the black tunnels of death to Sitanda's Kraal and safety. It is written in the True Word."

He motioned his warriors and hunters to proceed. Harriet clutched his arm and held back.

"This is sheer idiocy," she said. "It's not happening!"

"Isn't it?" Brad grinned. "All right then. No harm in toddling along with them to have our chat with King Twala."

"No! Brad, let's run. *Run!*"

The high-plumed Chief turned, growling a warning to his warriors in a tribal dialect Brad could not understand.

"*Come!* Should you try to escape your destiny as written in the True Word you will be proven enemies and strangers, and must die."

"Who am I, Infadoos?" Brad yelled. "*Whor*

"You must speak the name yourself, as it is written in the Word. Who are you, stranger from the stars?"

Brad gulped and moved forward with Harriet.

"I—am—Alan, Alan Quatermain."

5

The something in Brad's memory that told him who the black-plumed Chief was and who he must be to keep them from being slain (The rattle of the long spears, the flashing blades, the body smells, the small human detail, like In-fadoos' skinny companion, Scragga, picking his nose and brushing a fly off his ear: all were too real not to believe.) told him to hold his bearded chin high and be the indomitable hero straight out of the ancient steel-engravings.

Brad *wanted* to be Alan on his way to the mines.

His brain and his insides thrilled with it. It was as if some small part of him always had been Alan Quatermain by empathizing with him and yearning for this adventure, for the agonizing trek beyond the Mountains of Sulimen, for all of it, terrifying and glorious.

For an hour he reveled in it, tramping along behind the tall, black-plumed tribal chief and Scragga; he dizzy with the need for it. His life under Star Control had been bleak, circumspect, and soul-strangling. Now it was as if all his secret dreams were about to burst loose and carry him into wild, wondrous worlds of enchantment where every fragment of his mind and senses would savor, thrill and find complete fulfillment.

He forgot about Harriet. After all, she wasn't Captain Good with his false teeth and glass eye and half-shaven face. She was only a chattel. She was not of the True Word, and what was not of the True Word was nothing.

It took two good days' traveling along Solomons Great Road, which pursued its even course right into the heart of Kukuaneland. The country seemed to grow richer and richer. The kraals, with their wide surrounding belts of cultivation, more and more numerous ...

"Where's the Great Road?" Brad cried finally. "Where are the kraals, the cultivated farms?"

Infadoos turned. His mahogany face showed disappointment, his arm flung out in a gesture of dismay.

"We have spent many days seeking. It seems to me that all my life has been spent wandering with my warriors through these valleys, seeking the Word. We have done all that we could. We found ourselves with blades and spears and plumes. We hunted game for our food, according to the Word. Only with this day's sun has hope of fulfillment of the True Word come—with you, Alan Quatermain!"

Brad sighed. *And, much as I want to be Alan, I'm only a bastard brain-child of the True Word. Maybe Harriet and I are the illusions!*

Sense and strict training took over his brain.

"Infadoos." He licked his dry lips. "Where *did* you come from, before you began this search, I mean?"

Infadoos scowled. Then, because he couldn't understand what Brad was hinting at and refused to even try to understand it, he snapped the native equivalent of "shut up" and whirled front again.

They tramped on through the wide valley in grim silence. The weariness of seeking and not finding what must be found was in the faces of the warriors and hunters. It was as if they had been transplanted straight out of a book, and had no means of finding their way back into the book. Back into the True Word...

"Brad."

He took notice of Harriet panting alongside and slightly behind him, as befit a slave.

"What is it?"

"I don't understand any of this. They're like viz-pics I've seen of Africans who inhabited Earth a long time ago."

"Yes." He hesitated about telling her the impossible truth.

"How could they have got here? Do you suppose they're one of the lost colonies, or hiding from SC, who retrogressed?"

"I don't know; I don't think so."

"Why not?"

"I just don't." His jaw clamped shut with Infadoos' own torture in not finding the way back into the Word. The empathy, the memory-dream, the desire was very strong.

"Brad."

"All right!" he snapped out.

"I just noticed something funny."

"Funny!"

"Odd. Look at them, I mean, at their heads. I mean, around their heads—the same emerald halo—like the butterflies and every other form of life we've seen on Virgo."

Brad looked; it was true. Around the Chief's head and around the heads of every one of the hunters and warriors was the same coruscating nimbus of whirling flecks. He'd been so taken by the magic of things, he hadn't noticed.

"It's the one thing not of the Word!"

"What do you mean?" Harriet begged. "Tell me!"

While they trudged, Brad told her all about Alan Quater-main and King Solomon's Mines. "Don't you see? Chief Infadoos and his warriors are the group of Kukuanas who met Alan and his four companions after they'd crossed the impassable mountains called Sheba's Breasts. I managed to

convince Infadoos that the others had died from the privations and horrors of the trek to keep him from killing us.

The Kukuanas of the True Word are very bloodthirsty. They kill for food, for fun, for almost anything. There was one particularly gruesome passage where their witch doctor has a passel of other tribals slaughtered ritually by the hundreds while Alan and his friends have to stand around and watch."

"And you like all this?" Harriet shuddered.

"I like the idea of being part of the True Word."

"But they are *real*, not book people at all."

"They're real; that's one thing I'm sure of."

"Brad, I thought of something else. How is it that we understand them? I don't think they're speaking English, are they?"

Brad gave a doubtful shrug. "I'm not sure, but since the True Word is English, as written by their creator, H. Rider Haggard, it's quite natural that we have to understand it. It's a device that writers have to use if their readers are going to understand the dialog. Somewhere along the line, *somebody* learns the lingo; otherwise no dialog, no conversation, no communication."

"Oh."

"Forget it. What I'm wondering now is: what about King Twala? What about the total Kukuana tribe? Do they exist, too, or is it only this group that got snatched out of the True Word?"

"From the bewildered look on the Chief's face when you asked about the nonexistent Great Road and the kraals—"

"Right. Somehow, I don't think we're ever going to have the pleasure of meeting King Twala, husband of a thousand wives, Chief and Lord Paramount of the Kukuanas, terror of his enemies, student of the Black Arts, leader of a hundred thousand warriors; Twala the One-eyed, the Black, the Terrible."

"All that? Pity." Harriet was suddenly looking at Brad with a critical, head-cocked intensity.

"What is it, Love Dove?"

"No emerald halo."

"You either." He grinned. "Guess we haven't earned ours yet."

6

"The road ends there."

Infadoos halted and spoke the words with solemn intensity. Brad knew why. They were straight out of the True Word. It seemed that it gave him comfort to speak words ordained for him to speak. At least that much of the True Word was left to him.

"We will proceed in that direction." He pointed.

Harriet tugged Brad's arm. "It's the wrong way!"

"What do you mean, wrong way? There's no Great Road. No semblance of path where he's pointing, or anyplace else."

"Father!" Harriet exclaimed. "It's not the way we ought to be heading to find the ship. The creek bed wasn't either, quite, but it was easier going and I thought—"

"All right, already. I'll tell him."

But Infadoos bridled up at the suggestion of trekking right rather than left. He showed physical agitation amounting to terror. The others did, too, when Brad thumbed Harriet's ESP way over the hills to their right.

"Not that way!" Infadoos snorted fiercely. "Bad witches that way!"

Some of the young warriors demonstrated how upset they were by drawing back their spears for hurling.

"They don't like the ship!" Harriet said.

"Why would they? Fire monster from out of the sky!" Brad turned to placate Infadoos and, through him, the blood-hungry young bucks. "You say the road ends there. Why does it end?"

Infadoos sighed and nodded in satisfaction.

"The mountains beyond are filled with caves and there is a great pit between them, where the wise men of old time used to go to get whatever it was they came to this country for. That is where our kings are buried in the Place of Death."

"What was it they came for?" Brad asked, obedient to the True Word.

Infadoos chuckled.

"Nay, I know not. My lords who come from the stars should know."

Brad groped to remember the True Word.

"You are right, Infadoos. We of the stars know many things. I have heard, for instance, that the wise men of old came to get bright stones, pretty playthings, and yellow metal besides."

"My lord is wise. I am but a child and cannot talk with my lord on such things. My lord must speak with Gagool the Old, at the king's place, who is wise even as my lord."

"Delighted."

Infadoos scowled.

"Now he's mad again. Why?" Harriet whispered.

"I diverted from the Word. They're happier when the dialog's exactly right; it's their security blanket. Right now, I'm supposed to point up at those lofty, snowcapped mountains—"

"What lofty, snowcapped—"

"Shhh! I point and say, 'There are Solomon's mines.' My knowing the True Word makes him happy, and the others by osmosis."

"What about us coming from the stars? We did!"

"It's still in the True Word. Haggard, the creator of the True Word, had his natives call Alan's party 'children of the stars.' That *we did* is mere coincidence."

"It's all making my brains whirl like those halos."

"Me too. We'll just have to follow along until something helpful happens."

"If ever," Harriet murmured. "The wrong way!"

The slope they traveled (Infadoos remained stolid-faced and hopeful) was thickly wooded; when they at last attained an open flat halfway up the mountain, the sky took on the muddy, mauve look that told them night was about to leap down upon them.

Infadoos reluctantly gave the order to make camp. Fires were built to cook the game and to guard against prowling jungle predators. Whether they existed in truth or not was of no importance; they menaced the tribesmen of Kukuana-land in the True Word and being jumped by a savage African lion was almost to be wished for, to add reason to their hunger for the Word. There were other hungers, big ones.

The game animals roasting on spits, the smell of wood smoke and their day's march, made Brad hungry as a timber wolf. He dug in, slashing a great hunk of haunch off, dripping suet and blood; he gnawed on it like Alan himself might have done. Harriet watched him, her nostrils twitching distaste; but when he slashed a hunk off for her, she accepted it, and nibbled at it, blinking away guilty tears.

After supper Brad tried to learn more about Infadoos and his warriors. He was mostly interested in where they had come from, exactly. Little information was forthcoming; but several fearful, covert glances in the direction Harriet thought Dr. Lloyd and his starship were located, had vague

meaning. The best Brad could understand was that on that hidden shelf on his SS was Haggard's book, the True Word.

Then why did they shun and fear it? *King Solomon's Mines* was the very source of their being. It was their genesis, their alpha and omega, their sacred relic, their Bible. Why had they, as it occurred to Brad, moved and kept moving *away* from it?

Infadoos finally, with a little growl of warning, turned his back on Brad and the fires and began to snore. Brad located Harriet back along the fringe of forest, as far as she could get away from the slumbering warriors.

"I'm not asleep," she whispered without turning. "What did you find out?"

"Not much. What Infadoos doesn't understand makes him snappish. How can I discuss metaphysics and para-psychological phenomena with a primitive out of a nineteenth-century adventure novel?"

"What are we going to do?"

"Take off as soon as they're all asleep."

"Infadoos posted guards."

"I see 'em; I see 'em. They're drooping already. They know from experience there ain't no wild beasties in this jungle. When they drop off and that middle fire bums down a bit more, we'll make our move."

"Brad—" Harriet turned; her green eyes mirrored the flickering flames a dozen yards away. "Are you sure? I mean about the animals? If something like this could happen... I'm sure I heard something a while ago."

"Like what?"

"Like a long undulating cry. It was oddly familiar!"

"It was in your head. Shut up and sleep. I'll wake you when the coast's clear."

It was not easy to thread among the long-limbed sleepers; twice Brad touched Harriet's arm for her to lie down and play possum when one of the guards stirred and yawned, on the verge of waking. When they had stepped delicately over the outermost of the sleeping warriors, Brad took Harriet's arm and ran for the trees.

Harriet blundered over a fallen branch. Brad caught her from falling but the crackling and her involuntary cry brought one of the guards to his feet. Born (or characterized) to sleep lightly and fear the night jungle, the black yowled alarm and brought others to the alert.

"Run!" Brad yelled. "Our only chance is to find a hole the spears can't reach in and pull the hole in after us."

They ran.

But the forest floor was slippery with leaves and the thickness of the underbrush made their progress difficult. They fled with torches at their back and spears whistling over their heads.

Brad heard Infadoos' voice bawl out with angry chagrin. "Come back! You are going against the Word! For this you shall die most horribly, and the woman who is your chattel shall die first, while you watch! It is she who has caused you to do this thing! She is a witch and all witches must die the death of the white-hot spear and the fire-tongued blade!"

They crashed on. There was no hope for stealth, nowhere to hide where these jungle-trained warriors could not ferret them out. Panicked, they plunged on; then, when

Brad heard rustlings and murmuring voices to both sides of them and then in front, as well, he knew there was no use. He might have given them the slip alone, but Harriet was sobbing for breath and spent.

"Easy." He stopped her. "I'll talk him out of it again. Ill think of something. We still have the rifle and our side arms."

But Infadoos remembered, and when the warriors dragged them triumphantly back into the fire circle the first thing he did was to unsling the rifle from Brad's shoulder and take the l.b. out of his belt. Harriet's small arm was inside her pack because its weight on her belt had bothered her, but he did not know how to get it out.

She screamed when the hands overwhelmed them and bound them to the wide trunk of a huge tree.

Scragga swaggered before them when the first dim light of misty dawn fingered the mountaintop behind them. He chuckled while he poked them with the point of his spear. Scragga was skinny, young and bandy-legged; it gave him pleasure to needle them, knowing they could not fight back.

After a while Infadoos came and whisked him back. The warriors made a semicircle behind him, dipping their spears into the fire to make them white hot.

"She—" Infadoos glared at Harriet, "She dies first. She is a witch and not True Word!"

"Of course she is of the Word! She's with me, isn't she? She is from the stars, from over the forbidden mountains!"

Infadoos grinned craftily.

"If she is True Word let her speak it."

Harriet stared up at the bobbing, black plume. She flung a wild look at Brad. "I—I can't. I don't 'know the Word!"

Brad twisted and strained to break his bindings but the effort only made them tighter.

"Infadoos, listen! I'm going to tell you something; it's not going to be easy for you to believe. I know the Word seems like it's everything. Well, it's not. There are other Words like yours, whole libraries full of them. Why not forget the Word, be your own man! Live to suit yourself instead of following after something you'll never find because it just doesn't exist!"

Infadoos gave back an uncomfortable growl.

"Try to understand!" Brad yelled. "You think you'll find Twala and the rest of your Kukuanas. Well, you won't. Let me tell you why. Because they aren't here. They just—"

The jolting slap that bloodied his teeth against his lips was triggered by boiling indignation. It was as though Brad had spat upon the True Cross. They felt that he must be stopped from such blasphemy, now and forever.

"The Word is All!" Infadoos shrieked. "Now I know that the woman is witch and that you are witch, too! All that you said before was lies. You are not Alan Quatermain; you are unword and worse. Die, witch! Die, unword!"

Chanting the exultant words of Gagool the Witchslayer, the ring of warriors removed their spears from the fire, white-hot now. Wildly eager, they swarmed to destroy those who had committed the sacrilege of denying the True Word.

7

The cry that froze the morning air and the crescent of smoking spears could not have come from a human throat. It was too savage and too special. Brad recognized it at once but not the reason for it. It spun a nerve-electrifying chill out of his loins that curled his toes; it made the hair of his head and his beard prickle. It came out of the depths of the deep forest, and with it came a muffled thunder that shook the huge tree they were tied to and the ground under it.

"That's it," Harriet gasped. "That's what I heard, and you didn't believe!"

"I still don't. But if it's who I *think*—"

"It's all getting to be too much, much too much!"

It sounded again, an exultant half-animal, half-human cry of perpetual, inevitable triumph. Besides animal and human there was in it something of a god, a jungle god.

"What new horror?" Harriet wailed.

"Wait—no! If it's what and who I think, impossible as— Harriet, yell! Scream! *Loud!* He's a sucker for ladies in distress!"

Her yell was quavering, weak and fearful of the screamer in the forest and the thunder as much as of Infadoos and his warriors.

"*Louder*, stupid! Don't you see? It's all done by True Word, and *his* True Word involves girls in deadly peril by the bushel. Scream! Yell! Make it sheer panic and terror like in his Word!" Brad demonstrated.

"You think I have to fake it?" Harriet sniffled.

She shrieked so that the brightening slate overhead became a blackboard with fingernails raked across it.

"That's my baby! Again, please."

Harriet obliged, and this time Brad yelled out manly expressions of needful assistance as remembered from the Word. Harriet's wild pleas for help were most calculated to draw his attention but his share in their mutual jeopardy was quite proper to the Word, as he guessed it; but he could be wrong. *Opar!* He must not be wrong. How often had he not heard that savage, full-throated boast hurled out between the stars in the lonely times when Zartan the untamable was his well-thumbed choice?

There was a hiatus, a trembling wait. The incredible admixture of fiction-made-fact paused, as if a first-act curtain had been rung down or a chapter ended.

Then-

"Kill them!" Infadoos bawled, the chords in his neck straining to break through his ebony skin. "Kill the witches!"

The god-creature in the woods held back his paean of triumph and warning; but the thunder of immense, world shaking hooves moved closer, shaking the trees.

The warriors were about to obey but the rumbling under their feet and the shuddery sound of a tide of flesh hurling upon them, was too much. It seemed that the she-witch had shrieked for her jungle demons to come and help them, and that the demons had come.

When the gray tide of beasts crashed through on them, the Kukuana tribesmen yelled and panicked. Some few warriors turned and hurled their spears futilely at the trumpeting elephants, before they fled; others just fled. Infadoos bawled for them to stay and fight, but they would not. The demon herd was monstrous, a juggernaut of waving trunks and tusks. The captives had called them and now it was their turn to die, unless they could use those long legs to escape to the craggy heights where they hoped the demons could not climb.

Infadoos stood his ground. Scragga, perhaps from sheer terror stayed. After all, he was the Chief's son!

The elephant horde plowed full into the clearing, raising dust, trampling the morning fires and what gear the blacks had left behind.

When the Chief grabbed his knife and came at them, Brad read purpose in his contorted face. If he could manage to kill the witches, he believed the demons would vanish. Brad yelled, squirming violently to tear loose his bonds, his eyes trapped by the twisted fury of a face and upheld knife. Behind him Scragga drew his own all-purpose blade; his aim was Harriet.

Brad yelled.

"Zartan! Where are you! Help!"

Infadoos' blade was burning down to sever Brad's heart when the lead elephant rammed through the others and a bronzed giant of a man leaped from his position astride the great beast's neck. The giant's muscular arm caught Infadoos and his blade as in a curling whip, while at the same time his muscular leg rammed out at Scragga and sent him spinning.

"Thanks, Zartan," Brad said, while the forest giant set briskly about cutting them loose. "You are Zartan? Zartan the Stupendous?"

The handsome, savage face showed even white teeth; the immense shoulders shrugged indifferently.

"If you like." He watched Infadoos scramble away up the rocks where the hunters and warriors had vanished.

"Perhaps I should kill them so that they won't bother you again, Clayton."

Brad gulped.

"I—I'm not Clayton."

Zartan's dark brows knitted.

"No? Then why did I save you?" He whipped his look toward Harriet, who was rubbing her arms where the vines had cut. She was looking very lovely, in spite of her smudged and torn tunic. "I see. It was you who called me, in obedience to the Word. You, Jane."

Harriet stared, blinked and turned to Brad for her cue. Brad could only shrug. There was something honest, noble and frank about the animal-god-man that made it difficult if not impossible to lie. Brad noticed now that, like Infadoos and all his tribe, Zartan wore a nimbus of dancing specks around his head like a curious halo. Even the elephants had halos.

Zartan's grave, blue eyes remained appreciatively fixed on Harriet while he waited for a response.

"I know all about you, Zartan. I've read several of the books—I mean, I do know the Word." Her glance toward Brad was an appeal. "But I—I'm afraid I'm—not exactly Jane."

Brad experienced a twinge to notice that her flushed face and breathy rush of words suggested that she wouldn't mind being Jane at all, that under given circumstances she might adopt the role temporarily. Zartan's smile remained courteous to the point of reverence.

It widened suddenly.

"Of course not! You are Miriam. Your companion here saved you from the Arab slave-traders, and you escaped into the jungle only to be captured by these evil blacks!"

"No." Harriet made a helpless gesture. She could not lie to those honest, blue eyes in that heroic, brown face.

Zartan frowned.

"Corner

"Sorry."

"Not Pan-a-lee!"

She shook her head. "Actually my name is Harriet Lloyd. My companion is Starman Bradley Mantee. We are hunting for—for my father, Dr. Milton Lloyd. His—ah—airship crashed somewhere and we're trying to find him. Have you seen anything or heard anything that might help us?"

The tawny-maned head moved slowly back and forth. His lips tightened in disappointment. Like Infadoos, Zartan sought fulfillment of the True Word (a different True Word, but equally vital to his existence as the tribesmen's True Word was to them) and now, it seemed that the same kind of hope Infadoos had burned with had leaped in Zartan's muscular chest, compelling him to rush to their rescue. All this was very like his Word, but it was *not* Zartan's Word.

His fine brows knitted and he looked away from them.

Brad understood what went on inside that haloed head and sympathized. The why of all this was incredible and baffling, but they must take it at face value since it was here.

"You are unhappy because we are not True Word," he said.

"Yes."

"But we do understand about the True Word! A little, anyway. We understand that something inside of you insists that you keep moving on, hunting for full realization of the Word."

"Of course. Is that not true of yourselves, of everyone capable of thought? Are we not all seeking fulfillment of the Word?"

Brad nodded. Infadoos had said something very like that, but not as well. Brad remembered now that Zartan was actually of noble birth and possessed a brilliant mind to go with his magnificent body. Perhaps, then,

he could understand that there were other True Words. Perhaps eventually, since true fulfillment was impossible, Zartan might do what to Infadoos was unthinkable, build a new, real life for himself on this wonderful world of brilliant vegetation and towering summits, forgetting the Word dreams he yearned for or allowing the Word to become a misty, Edenic memory forever beyond his attainment

Brad would try, cautiously, because he didn't really know how it all happened or just how much more there was of this Word or other Words.

Zartan's massive chest heaved; eyes struck fire. His frown was a fierce negation of everything Brad had said. For a cracking moment Brad thought the ape milk he had suckled in his forest babyhood was going to spill out in lethal action. But Lord Staygroke prevailed.

"I don't wish to hear any more of this nonsense," Zartan said curtly. "I must go. I must follow my destiny."

"Wait! Tell me this: Where did the Word start? Were you actually born and raised here in this jungle? If you were—"

"I must go." Zartan signaled his pachyderm mount to kneel so that he could leap lithely aboard. "Goodbye, Harriet Lloyd. Goodbye, Bradley Montee. I hope you find what you are looking for."

The dust of his abrupt departure left them coughing.

"I don't really know who he is," Harriet said. "I just said that. But I do vaguely remember hearing somebody like him mentioned, somebody out of the old books." She stared where Brad was staring, into the departing dust-clouds and the valley mists. "Who is he? I wanted to thank him."

Brad grinned.

"Wrong True Word, baby—no mask, no white horse."

8

Brad kept them moving in the direction Harriet's ESP said Dr. Lloyd and the starship were until exhaustion and hunger set in. He felt that they need not worry about Kukuana vengeance. What else they had to worry about besides the witch-killing blacks was impossible to speculate upon. They plopped down on a mossy bank at the foot of the mountain range they must cross if they were to follow the voice in Harriet's mind; it was a pleasant flowery dell and a relief from Infadoos' seven-foot warriors and Zartan's elephant herd.

They ate.

While they rested Brad mulled things over, and after a while his thoughts spilled out in words.

"Asleep?"

"Not quite. What are you mumbling and scowling about?"

"Did you notice that even the elephants had halos?"

"So? The old religions had it that only man was privileged to wear one and become an angel; we've always been smug about such things. The dragonflies here on Virgo wear halos, why not elephants?"

"The dragonflies are indigenous. The elephants came out of the True Word, according to ERB."

"About that, I was very surprised. I mean, why animals, and such big, lumpy ones besides! I could understand cute little monkeys or—"

"Just what you said. Humans aren't really that special, although we like to think we are. I do have a theory about it, though."

"And?"

"These True Words spring out of books. Since Virgo is one hundred percent primitive, so far as we know at least, there are no books. So where did the books come from?"

"That's obvious: out of your ship, from that secret shelf of goodies you were supposed to hand over for destruction by the SC censors, but didn't."

Brad nodded.

"Right. That's the only place: my secret horde of books, or out of our minds."

"Out of *your* mind. I didn't read the books, remember?"

"Good enough, my mind or my books. I think from the books. Why? Because they were there, like they used to say about mountain climbing. There they were for the taking."

"Hidden in the wall."

Brad frowned. "Take a bit of finding. Maybe your father... By the way, was he a fiction reader, by any chance?"

"I wouldn't know."

"No, that's right. About that theory of mine... Suppose somebody, some life-force we have never before run into, found the books; and they somehow, in some way we can't even dream about, nipped out characters purely at random..."

"Elephants and native warriors and all?"

"Exactly. Including Gutenberg knows who or what else!"

"You ought to know," Harriet pointed out with a delicate yawn. "You know all the books."

"Practically word for word. But which characters did they snatch out and where are they?" He shrugged and lifted himself on both elbows. "As to where, whoever or whatever got brought into being, they're out there someplace bumbling around seeking the True Word."

"And not," Harriet murmured, "finding it."

The rising terrain was gentle at first, and the trees were thick. Some of the lacey verdure was jeweled with berry clusters and some of the trees hung with huge yellow fruits. They ducked under cover when a late afternoon shower dropped suddenly and, since within a hundred yards or so the easy slope became naked cliff, Brad suggested that they find a dry, safe spot and spend the night there, leaving the alpine climb for the morrow when they would be fresh.

Harriet was willing. Brad picked an arc of cliff wall where nothing or nobody could sneak up on them from behind and where blue vines provided a partial screen in front.

Brad was just dozing off when he heard Harriet's sharp intake of breath and then the chanting of several voices. The voices were singing in rapid unison and the droll tune was familiar to him.

"What in-"

"Shhh!" Harriet begged. "They're coming into the glade down there. I've been watching them for five minutes. Aren't they cute?"

Brad crept forward to where the girl was peeking between the vines. Below them, in a kind of well-selected amphitheatre where tall trees formed a natural backdrop, came an odd trio dancing in lockstep from backstagish shrubs. They were dwarvish and had long beards which they almost tripped over; they wore a kind of arboreal armor composed of wide leaves and huge upsidedown lilies for helmets. The graying dusk added to the solemn yet somehow gay drollery of their obviously designed-for-an-audience performance.

"... who is longing for the rattle of a fascinating battle— and the guns that go BOOM! BOOM!"

Brad stifled a wild laugh.

"Who are they?" Harriet demanded, *sotto voce*.

"Don't you know?"

"No! Shhh. Don't frighten them away. I think they're skittish in spite of claiming to be such brave warriors."

"Three very fierce warriors are they, sons of Gama, who, like most sons, are masculine in sex. Fighting is their trade. But when it comes right down to a hand to hand battle they—"

"Quiet, Brad! Let *them* tell it!"

"And a good job, too."

The trio finished their rapid turn and then began to bow, looking crestfallen and bewildered when there was no response. They believed that there must be an audience out there someplace; it was in the True Word.

"That's our cue," Brad told Harriet. "Let's hear it for the sons of Gama!" He stood up and applauded vigorously. Harriet gave a perplexed moue, then joined when it was obvious from the exaggerated bowing and chortling that resulted on the stage that the trio was pleased.

"Encore!" Brad urged.

But his yell frightened them, and they went skipping back into the trees in a hurry.

It rained the next day. Brad wondered if this might be the beginning of Virgo's wet season and hoped not. While both starships were virtually weather-proof, a flood-size downpour wouldn't help. Dr. Lloyd might still

be hundreds of kilometers away, the going was all uphill and there was no shelter.

The rock underfoot was slippery with moss and lichen, and Brad's lead took them back and forth in wide sweeps where there were semblances of natural paths and handholds.

They were nowhere near the initial summit yet, with steeper heights to be scaled after that, when Brad found a cave. It was musty and dark within; a sinister charnel odor crept up from the volcanic fingers his torch revealed, yet the cave mouth was dry and that was all they asked at the moment. They wanted a dry place to rest and eat and wring themselves out.

In glum silence, they did what they could to make themselves comfortable. Harriet kept casting fearful glances behind them toward the plunging offshoots where the bad smells came from. Eventually she wondered aloud what was down there and how far down the network reached.

"It's obviously volcanic. Who knows?" Brad shrugged. "What gets me is that peculiar smell. Reminds me of a prim where—never mind."

"None of your masculine pussyfooting, please."

"Anyway, they were cannibals."

Brad took his torch and moved cautiously back toward the largest of the descending branches..

"Cannibals! And you're going down there!"

"Not far. I'll take a fast look. There's a sudden drop, looks like. I'll just flash the light down..."

"Here, take my laser gun. You ought to carry it anyway. I've never fired it at anything living since I got it."

"Thanks. Too bad the elephants made hash of the rifle. This hand gun's all we've got. You stay back there near the mouth and wait."

"I will not!"

"Suit yourself."

Their boots crunched hollowly on the rocky floor. Brad's torch caught the glitter of mica and flecks of precious mineral among the stalactites overhead.

"The mountain's probably honeycombed with these passages created by ancient lava flows, and bubble chambers like this one."

"Brad."

"Yes?"

"What *are* you looking for?"

"Not sure; I've got this funny hunch. As if—"

"—as if what, pray?"

"Like I've been here before; maybe it was all that ver-boten fiction reading. Like in one of those books there was an abyss where—"

"Speaking of abysses!" Harriet cried.

Directly in front of them yawned a huge irregular pit which Brad's torch could not find the bottom of. He felt the clutch of the girl's fingers on his arm as he moved the ring of light across the curved wall opposite and downward. His right thumb toyed involuntarily with the stud of the laser blast.

Whether the torchlight had anything to do with the scream was immaterial. It could have been that the screamer dared to loose her fear and

forlorn terror because the flickering light gave hope where there was none, down in the stygian bowels of the mountain.

She screamed and screamed.

Then the scream was silenced.

"Where is she?" Harriet breathed.

"Someplace down there; there's a hole in that wall and a kind of broken path up. I caught a glimpse of something white moving. *There!*"

The swinging light caught a ghostly pastel blur of movement in their direction and shaggy shadows lumbering after. When the runner panted to within a few downward yards, Brad handed Harriet the torch and reached an arm down to pull her up.

Her child's face was a mask of fear, which changed to something naively like a smile when she saw Brad. She flung herself into his arms with a frenzied cry.

"You have come to save me from the Morlocks!"

"Morlocks?"

She pointed at the shaggy creatures who were still pursuing her, shambling in a single file up the path by which she had escaped and squealing among themselves. They were less agile than the girl but seemed acclimated to the dark. In fact, when Harriet waved the torch their way they stopped and clung to the back wall as if the light seared their blank eyes.

"Keep the light on them," Brad told her. "I'll give them something else to think about."

He thumbed the l.b. stud. Invisible light flung across the dropped. "Let's get out, before they find a way across!"

Harriet was already running ahead of Brad and the slim escapee, who clung to him like a confident limpet, all twining arms and wide, blissful eyes. They stopped for breath at the cave's mouth. He disengaged her from himself and held her at arm's length.

She was slim as a wand, even emaciated, as if she had lived on handfuls of fruits and edible grasses all of her sixteen or seventeen years. She had big glowing eyes, long wheat-blond hair, and she was beautiful as a dryad out of a tree.

Staring openly, Brad found himself reacting to her adoration, though there was little libidinal passion in her wide smiles.

"You are from Time," she sighed. "You came to save Deena."

"Deena..." Brad smiled and shrugged. "Well, if it helps."

Harriet stood there, critical.

"Who's Deena? What are Morlocks?"

"They're from the books."

"I figured that much. Which books? Never mind, I wouldn't know about them anyway. Let's get out of here before those creeps down there make it across that hole you cut in the path."

The rain had diminished to the monotony of a drizzle. They took up the task of moving themselves upward in the direction of, the first major plateau. Brad kept Deena between them for safety and perhaps because she seemed so helpless. She wasn't. She seemed quite capable of handling herself in their climb. Her pink singlet, a brief affair, clung to her unfulfilled curves in revealing fashion; her sandals found niches and crannies before Brad found them, so that in the end she beat them up to the plateau.

They rested.

"Deena—" Harriet started.

Deena's eyelashes moved down coolly. She gave Harriet a shy look that expressed possible enmity, then turned and smiled beatifically at Brad.

"Well!"

"Don't worry," Brad grinned. "She's from a quixotic nineteenth-century idea of an umpteenth-century Earth where the Morlocks live underground and raise the surface dwellers for food. At the sound of a whistle Deena's people were brainwashed to come down to dinner: *they* were dinner." He nodded encouragingly to the girl curled up at his feet. "How did you get away?"

"There were others. There was this boy; I liked this boy. They escaped and I tried, too. But one of the Morlocks grabbed me and—" She shuddered. "I let him drag me along and then I pushed him over the edge and ran and ran. When I saw the light I knew it was you come in your machine to save me."

She sighed and rubbed her cheek against his arm like a kitten. Then she closed her eyes and slept, an exhausted child who doesn't quite believe that anything is *very* real.

Brad eased her gently off him and turned to Harriet.

"I'm this time traveler, you see. I blundered into her world on my time-bike and... well, I saved her from the Morlocks."

"And?" she said crisply.

"And nothing. I went back where I belonged."

"Good show." Harriet nodded emphatically and lay back.

Brad eyed the rise and fall of her full breasts with smiling satisfaction.

9

When Brad blinked open his eyes it was morning. Yesterday's rain clouds had spent themselves, and warm steam was rising up from the lichened rocks around them. Harriet was doing something to her hair and looking very charming about it. Deena was nowhere in sight.

Brad sprang up fast.

"Where is she?"

"She? You mean Deena?"

"Who else, stupid! What did you say to her?"

"Say? What would I say to a childish birdbrain who—oh, hell! I didn't lay a finger on her; when I woke up half an hour ago she was gone."

"Gone where?"

"Brad, you *are* silly! How do I know? Back to that bird-brain boy she said she liked. Anyway, you aren't who she thought you were. Maybe she figured that out during the night." She gave a sharp toss. "These book characters are all bent on one thing, following the True Word. You and I don't really match up. Your precious Deena's simply doing what her impulses insist on, like Zartan and Infadoos and the others."

Brad frowned, whipping fast looks around him with a view toward tracking down the dryad.

"She seemed so vulnerable."

"Maybe, maybe not. You're still under the spell of those big goo-goo eyes, Brad. May I suggest that we have something to eat and be on our way. Looks like we're going to have one of Virgo's rare shiny days. When that sun climbs up over that crag it's going to be a scorcher."

Brad gave the invisible goat path toward the mist-hung valley a heavy look and nodded.

It was noon by the time they reached the first patches of snow. A rivulet from those snows, tumbling icily along a ravine, had produced a kind of natural path along its bank which made their climb from the plateau somewhat easier. They rested there, ate, drank from the stream, and eventually turned their reluctant eyes up toward the glacial immensities they must yet surmount if they were ever to look over on the other side of the peaks. Hopefully, they would then confirm Harriet's insistence that somewhere beyond lay Brad's SS and Dr. Lloyd.

"Ready?" Brad asked.

They hadn't spoken much during the march. Brad reflected the idea that it was because he somehow blamed Harriet for Deena having deserted them during the night. It wasn't that he lusted after Deena, he told himself, but she was pretty and weak, where Harriet kept surprising him with her buoyancy, her resilience, her intuitive intelligence that kept him on his toes. Maybe it was all that reading: Brad was the all-man, would-be hero; Deena was the helpless, clinging female.

Harriet wasn't that way. She had trailed her father halfway across the galaxy, alone. It took brains and guts and a lot most of the book women didn't have. They were their heroes' ego-feeders. *Harriet is—*

Well, she's damn special, and while she irritates the hell out of me every once in a while, she also—never mind. Later.

When they took up their task again, across the snow-patched rise toward what promised to be a very difficult climb (they might never make it) into heavy, steep drifts, Brad produced a couple of staffs. When he handed Harriet hers and then tied her to him with nylon cord from their packs, he made an effort to indicate his admiration for her *sisu* by his concern for her safety. Harriet smiled tightly and nodded to indicate that she understood. Brad wasn't inarticulate, nor was he unresponsive to her feminine charms; but this -wasn't the time or place. Why complicate it with romance?

They breathed in the thinning atmosphere and, goggled against the reflected light, they climbed.

Toward evening, by which time they were completely flagged, the sun was gone and a rising wind tossed ragged shrouds of mist on them from above. They were hard put to see where they were poking their staffs or putting their boots. Insecure footing might send them both plunging down the glacial wall.

Now that the night fogs were rolling down on them with incredible speed, Brad doubted whether they would find their way back down the trail he'd picked out so cautiously for their ascent.

Since they could not go back, they must go forward and face the strangling wind where the oxygen was becoming so scarce it made them giddy. Every minute Brad expected Harriet to beg for a halt, and when she at last did he sagged back against the snow wall, pulling in the foggy air like a drowning man who has found a floating log.

They didn't talk; they couldn't. Brad worried food from his pack and handed Harriet some. They crouched there in the snarling wind, eating it and handfuls of snow.

When Brad got up and glanced tentatively windward, Harriet said, "Brad, I don't think I can make it any farther. I've got to sleep. I've got to! Sorry."

"I know. I was just looking for someplace a little better sheltered than this ledge. We'll dig out the sleeping bags this time. Can you make it just a bit farther, around that bend?"

"I'll try."

He helped her up; they sloughed slowly and painfully to the windy corner. Brad blinked hopefully around it. Not much could be seen through the driving fog, but he thought he glimpsed, with a start of unbelief, bits of glowing orange and red, off at an obtuse angle where a niche in the snow-

heaped cliff-line made a kind of cave. *Bits of fire! As if somebody's built a fire there, for heat, for cooking food. Somebody who'd just left it!*

Brad's shout of joy was lost in the wind but Harriet saw it too, and when he hurried to the fire niche she loped along gratefully. The fire was almost out, but those who had built it had left wood and a meaty game-carcass on a charred spit. The cut-in was boot trampled in a way indicating that there had been several in the party; the fact that the embers were still bright and that there were even a few persistent flickers of flame, indicated that they'd quitted the area only moments before.

Harriet fell into one of the seats they'd used while Brad hastened to build up the fire and reset the providential food on the forked sticks.

"Where are they?" Harriet wondered, warming her toes.

"Can't be far. Looks like they came over the peaks from the other side and—hey! Wow! Somebody forgot his flask!"

It was a leather affair like the ancient tosspots of Earth once carried wine in. Brad shook it. It was half-full, and when he uncorked and sniffed it, he guessed why. They who had built the fire and cooked the meat had drunk full well, so that one of them, having over-tipped, had dropped his flask in leaving.

Brad sipped delicately.

"Wow! One-hundred proof, at least. Must be some fast-fermenting plants here on Virgo, like Mexican maguey. What a party they must have. *Listen!* Did you hear that?"

From up the cliff came the wind-flung sound of jolly, drunken voices. They were deep, heroic, swashbuckling voices, sounding out their wild happiness in being to the unseen stars.

They were rakish, bawling, wine-happy voices, ranting demands of fate. They seemed to demand to know why they'd been jsnatched out of heroic

dreams and made real where they didn't belong.

Brad made out some words:

"When the stars lie flint, the 'putes all set, When the lock is shut and the buzz says 'get,' When the red light dims and it's time to burn, When the Captain signals and we know we'll learn—

"Sing, jets! Sing, stars!

"We're off to Mars!"

What brawling winds and distance snatched away, Brad's startled memory supplied.

"Who are they?" Harriet leaped to her feet.

"Quiet! Sing, Rysling! No, it's somebody else now. Shhhh... Listen!"

Another raucous voice chipped in:

" 'Tis meet and well that an errant knight go boldly forth and devil the chances, for this is the morn for flinging of lances and to hell with the beauty who fears a fight!"

Before Brad could gulp down an astonished breath, a third voice flung out drunken balladry:

"And then came in to that hall of sin

Into that Venurian Hell, A lusty girl who loved a good whirl, And her name was Checkecoo Belle!"

They were familiar to Brad; they heated the gnawing cold in his veins and eased the fear. They brought a lump to his throat. Often he had, out among the pitiless vacuums, sung out with them, sung out those very limericks and ballads. What would he have not given besides his right arm to have known those ancient dreamers of fierce dreams, who had fashioned

such glorious characters, giving them not only meat on their bones but also the gutty love of action. Three creations of legend and high adventure were up on the high cliff; they were drunk, wild and ready for anything. Each from a different True Word, they had somehow met and teamed together, traveled together, got drunk together, and now they were flinging their songs to the howling night skies of Virgo!

Brad longed fiercely to follow his living book-heroes. He started to, forgetting his ship, Dr. Lloyd and even Harriet. Then, suddenly, the raucous voices retreated and were blown away on the wind and gone.

While they sipped the fortuitous brew and gnawed the heated haunch, Harriet asked who *they* were. Brad tried to tell her, but the lump in his throat wouldn't let him do a good job of it. She sighed and stopped asking.

They slipped down into their sleeping bags and slept.

10

While the howling storm had blown itself out by morning, the befuddling fogs were still with them. Brad picked each ascending step of their path with care. Every now and then a crevasse would yawn out before them, to be detoured with blind-man care; sometimes the merest poke of his staff would tear loose an icy drift and send it skittering into deep limbo with sickening speed.

They made no time at all, it seemed. Fearful of causing lethal landslides on the peaks, and to save breath where oxygen was so precious, they trekked in silence. The tearing effect on the nerves was as debilitating as was the stringent muscular effort. There was no sensible place to take a break, so they sloughed on and on, until finally Harriet literally fell in a heap from exhaustion.

Brad crouched and cradled her giddily in his arms. He had the whirling notion that they were going to die here. *That was the way it happened. You flung out into the stars; you did your job under SC's critical sensors; then you ended up crow bait casually on some odd bit of dirt somewhere or other. Nobody to give a damn. One speck of light on SC's god size computer board gone out briefly, before it would be replaced by another of equally indifferent value.*

"Anyway, we die together," Brad murmured, and kissed the snow from her eyelashes.

"Brad..."

They held onto each other as if waiting for a merciful end to neural torture. The world around them was all of one monotonous shade and texture, as if they floated within some gray sea of death. Their fingers and toes began to numb.

"Do you mind dying?" Brad asked thoughtfully.

Harriet shook her head slightly and smiled. "Not really, but I wish I could have said hello to my father. All that distance—we came so close..."

Brad brushed his beard across her cheek and winced. He thought about the heroic three of last night. Would they have let go like this? After all, *they* had come over the mountain. *It has to be possible!*

He forced his heart to pump blood into his arms so that he could fumble out half-frozen food from his pack and feed Harriet, then himself. It took a while, but the effort and the restoration of lost body-heat brought them back to the point of believing in life again.

He hiked Harriet back up on her feet and forced her to go on. Every movement was fiery agony, every muscle screamed for mercy, but after all that was what life was. Death seemed too easy.

As if to make up for their misery, the last rays of sunset flamed out over the snowy summits in a burst of prismatic glory that stung their eyes to tears. Gaping and blinking at it in a welter of ancient beliefs in miracles, Brad saw figures.

There were seven or eight. They stood in a somber line against the flaming horizon.

Brad felt his neck hairs prickle. He didn't hear Harriet's gasp and her clutch at his arm took a full minute to register. He stared at the cowed figures, limned against the heavenly radiance and the highest peak of all, experiencing a sensation of transcendental rapture such as he never knew he had in him, especially after lingering on the lip of death a few hours ago and believing in nothing.

His knees sagged as the robed line moved gravely toward them.

"Providence!" Harriet cried/

"Funny, that's what she said."

"She?"

"Miss Brinkley."

"Who is-"

Brad gestured silence as the leader of the robed figures moved up to them. When he pushed back his peaked brown cowl they saw a lean, brown face and a high forehead with tilted lines of thin brow; it was a face like serrated parchment, a million small creases etched by age and ponderous philosophical thought. The sun behind him gleamed on his completely bald head, turning it into a shining, golden knob as if to illuminate what was so remarkable inside.

His narrow mouth smiled gravely at their astonishment. He seemed very pleased to see them, as did the other behind him.

He said, "My name is Tsung. I am from the Lamasery. Would you be so good as to present me to your friends, Mr. Conway?"

11

The sun on the snow, the faint whisper of wind tossing powdery rime across geometric angles, the Chinese monks smiling and nodding happily among themselves, and especially Tsung: all this seemed dream and shadow. It was sublime, but impossible to accept all in a minute.

It took Brad five minutes. What had happened before made it possible to believe.

"I'm not Robert Conway," Brad said bluntly. "Sorry."

The ascetic face clouded. "We had hoped—"

"I know. I rather wish I was, this time especially. My name is Brad Mantee, this is Harriet Lloyd. We're trying to find her father."

Tsung sighed. As if to accent his disappointment, the sun began to fade abruptly.

"Nevertheless, this is a rare moment. There is something very special about you two, even though you are not of the Word. I should have known it at once, of course. There would have been more of you." He nodded gravely. "Our mountains are always most beautiful after a violent storm. I have not seen the sun so golden since..." He stroked away his frown with long fingers that trembled a little. "Well, so be it. Names do not matter, do they? You are not of the Word, but you *know* the Word." He appeared most anxious about it.

"Yes."

"Then you will permit me to guide you to the Lamasery. It is not particularly far, but it is quite difficult."

"It'll be dark soon," Brad pointed out.

Tsung nodded. "You are right. Perhaps it would be best to make camp in one of the recessed places we passed during our day's journey. If you will follow, please."

"Glad to."

The monks improvised a litter for Harriet and the entourage returned to a sheltered spot and made camp. Harriet was too exhausted to question anything, but when Brad had eaten and was bedded down, he found his brain roiling with esoteric anagogics of all kinds. He had thoughts of High Lamas and glorious hidden valleys where no one ever grew old, where the spiritual and artistic wealth of a world was cherished against the cataclysm sure to come, a yearned-for haven...

But, is there? Is there a Lamasery?

When they broke camp next morning he broached his doubt to Tsung. After all, there had been no Great Road for Infadoos, no fulfillment for Zartan and the others. They had been taken out of the books but not all that went with them. Neither the true backgrounds nor all the rest of the characters they must encounter were there. They were hit-and-miss selectees, it seemed.

"Of course there is a Valley of the Blue Star!" Tsung smiled. "Of course there is a hidden Lamasery where the High Lama awaits us! Shamure does exist! It *must!*"

"For your sake I hope so, Tsung. But tell me this: *When* did you leave it? Yesterday? The day before? Last week?"

Tsung began to look worried. Brad hated seeing the change that came over his ancient, yet somehow youthful face when mistrust and then realization began to dawn.

"It is true that I cannot remember exactly when we last saw Blue Star. But I know we did live there. It was beautiful, serene, all that the human heart longs for."

"Maybe too beautiful to be true?" Brad suggested gently.

"No! We must have faith!"

Tsung gestured for his followers to commence the day's journey. Brad looked at Harriet and shrugged. *Well, if that's how it must be...* Tsung was distinct from the others they had encountered. There were mystical worlds inside that knobby skull that transcended mundane law. Maybe Tsung's and his followers' belief in Shamure was so strong, that, in realizing his character out of the Word, the rest of it, all of it—the Valley of the Blue Star, Shamure, the incredibly old High Lama, the whole sublime fantasy—had perforce been realized, too.

Might as well follow along and see. It's too wonderful an idea to miss, if...

Eventually the stuff of dreams blew away in the nagging wind; sheer weariness made it necessary to face facts. Harriet jelled the mood of distemper when she pointed out to Brad timidly that they were wandering off in the wrong direction.

"We'll never find the ship, Brad."

"Looks like we'll never find anything. Tsung!"

The Chinese halted the march and turned.

"We've been tramping for hours. Can you give me one concrete hint about where we're going besides wandering around in aimless circles?"

"We must have faith."

"Sorry, but I've about run out. How about heading down the other side of the range where the girl says we'll find her father. He might be hurt, dying."

Tsung considered this.

"Very well. We will find this ship of yours. Then we will go to the Lamasery."

While they groped out an easy way down into the low, long valley of deep mists and forests on the other side of the glacial range, Brad moved up even with Tsung and began to talk. He told him everything, all about Infadoos and the rest. He told Tsung about all the other True Words and his inescapable conclusions.

"And we are all such stuff as dreams are made on." Tsung took Brad's hand and made his fingers pinch his own flesh. "Does that seem real to you? Surely the blood flowing in my veins is as warm and valid as yours!"

"Sure. Sure, Tsung, you're alive, all of you. But the force or whatever that brought you to life wanted more than just blank entities. Somehow it blundered on my books and programmed your minds to match characters out of them, giving you all clear-cut personalities."

"And being out of books," Tsung murmured, "we are obliged to attempt as best we can to fulfill the destinies those ancient writers meant us to fulfill. An ingenious theory."

"If you've got a better one I'd sure like to hear it!"

Tsung wagged his head sadly.

"You have given me quite a jolt, Brad Mantee. But answer me this: if the persons you have encountered are book characters, what happens to them after the final chapter of the book? And if we are not to seek fulfillment of what seems to us to be the True Word, what are we to do to give sense and meaning to our lives?"

Brad grinned wryly.

"Just what we do under Star Control, muddle out your lives the best way you know how."

"Seeking what?"

Brad shrugged. "Whatever seems the right thing for you. We all have to keep plugging along doing the best we can."

"What you have told me, about an immense galaxy of inhabited stars, worlds my Word scarcely allows me to dream about, all scrupulously controlled by what you call Star Control—it sounds far more fantastic than anything I have told you."

"I'll bet it does at that."

"And far more difficult than following my True Word."

"Right. Open up those glorious pages and I'll climb right in with you. Wish I could. As a matter of fact, for a while there that's what I was trying to do!"

They moved in silence toward the patchwork snow, where blades of grass began to prick through the hard, brown earth.

In an hour Brad felt Tsung's thin hand touch his arm.

"I am beginning to doubt the Word. I am forced to believe you. Trying to think back, I find my mind blocked by a wall; beyond that wall, memory becomes something quite different. It becomes wishful dream. But it is sad, is it not, my friend, to lose one's faith even in one's creator?"

"But you'll find new patterns to follow. Virgo's teeming with gorgeous potentials. You've lost one horizon, but you'll find others. You'll build fine exciting lives for yourselves here on this new world. It's all yours!"

"But is it?"

"What do you mean? Wait. Yeah, I get it. Something or some force pulled you up out of those books. It had a reason for what it did—"

"And its reason may have been purely selfish."

"Probably. That's the way intelligence feeds on itself— Super-intelligence even more so—it's out there someplace watching us right now, I'll bet. It's waiting to see what its puppets do next. When the time's right for it, it will show its hand and tell us all why and what we all do when there's no more True Word to follow!"

12

Skirting the forested areas, they moved fast now. They reached the starship before sunset, just where Harriet's intuition brought them. It lay on its side over charred and twisted trees, where it had tipped over during its landfall. Brad groaned as he ran downhill toward his ship. The metal teardrop's pads were dragged out and broken from the tipping over, yet the hull itself seemed to be intact

The hatch was wide open; the ladder hung at a weird angle.

Harriet's frenzied worry brought her to the tilted rungs first.

"Easy. Better let me go in first. Don't know what we'll run into at this point." Brad moved Harriet firmly behind him and checked his l.b. Tsung and the others waited at a discreet distance, at the edge of the circle of blasted trees.

Brad climbed up, into the familiar cabin. The tightness of his rectus muscles and the tingling of a thousand wiry nerves, told him there was danger here. But his rapid flash of torchlight across the two chambers and into the engine room revealed nothing.

The ship was empty. Computers, engines, vids, and controls console had been neatly removed. It had been done so neatly that there was no evidence of the use of tools in the removal. It was as if a peculiarly sophisticated transmitter of matter had traced everything of mechanical, technological or personal interest and had whisked it away for a leisurely, scrupulous analysis.

Standing in the center of the emptied hull, staring, Brad heard Harriet's light footstep behind him.

"What could have done all this?" she whispered.

"Somebody with far more know-how than SC ever dreamed of. It's like they reached out across miles and scooped up everything invisibly with an incredibly neat scoop."

"Father too!"

"Right."

"How about your books?"

Brad pointed at an empty shelf where the controls cabin abutted the supplies chamber. "They got it all, everything. Slick as a whistle."

"Where, Brad! Where to?"

Brad shrugged. "Somewhere on the planet." He gave a long, low whistle as he crouched in an effort to find finger marks, smudges, tentacle trails or anything else to indicate a personal visitation. There was none.

Harriet shivered.

"It's—spooky. I mean, not a trace of them. They just located the ship somehow and took *everything*. Why?"

"They can't be locals; they're too clever by half, which means they come from someplace else. Someplace we've never been. Looks like while Project Yonder was getting ready for the next big jump Yonder was jumping our gun." He continued to examine the familiar, starkly hollow rooms. "Anyway they didn't touch my reserve fuel-supply." He took out three oblong tanks; it was ordinarily an awkward task, but in the emptiness, relatively simple. "This'll get us back to civilization in your ship, if—"

"If they let us! Brad, I've got the weirdest feeling we're being watched!"

"Probably, they wouldn't miss a bet like that. Their probes would quite naturally be keeping tabs on the ship, as one of the few artifacts on Virgo worth monitoring."

"Besides the book people."

"The book people are no trouble at this stage. They're still bewildered, still following the Word. Later on..." He was bending over the cup-seat before the missing controls, staring at an irregular, brownish blotch. "Well, let's get out of here."

But Harriet had seen it.

"Brad! It's blood, Father's blood! They killed him!"

Somewhat reluctantly, Tsung's men moved up to help Brad carry the three fuel tanks back into the forest where, by tacit agreement, they made camp. Since the unseen had removed everything else of possible interest from the star-ship there was no reason to suppose they or it would bother them yet. It would study them, Brad thought, monitor their actions, as it perhaps had been monitoring them all along, as far as they knew. In any case, running off in a panic and hiding would seem to be futile. The stripped ship had indicated power beyond anything SC had ever encountered before.

You can't fight what you can't see.

Brad built a fire, a big one. It was something to do and, while it served no useful purpose in the tropical warmth of the deep valley, it seemed to hold back the unseen terrors of the night. Three of them sat around it after Tsung's wide-faced, phlegmatic, under-drawn Tibetans had curled up for sleep. The flames made shadows on their silent faces.

"It would seem," Tsung said, after a preliminary cough, "that our highly-sophisticated unknown has come to Virgo on an exploratory visit, and that his major interest lies in the investigation of intelligent life more or less equal to its own."

Brad nodded.

"Its use of my books was an experiment. Maybe it thought the characters in them were historical, that they represented the typical genius

of—well, maybe not this planet, but others not distant. It wanted to see what we were like. What better way than to bring them to life and watch them and find out just what their life-pattern consists of."

"How?" Harriet demanded. "I mean, *how* could it do that: bring them to flesh-and-blood life?"

"How do I know? The fact that it could and did is what worries me; if it could do that it could do anything. And it's not about to let us take off and warn SC."

Harriet shivered closer to the fire.

"It killed Father!"

"Not necessarily," Brad said. "Dr. Lloyd could have bumped his head when the ship tipped over. He was probably out when the probes found him. Maybe they took him along and patched him up."

"You're just saying that! He could be dead!"

"Could be. I don't know. But why kill him? Their motive in coming here was investigational. He's their one live specimen. My guess is that in his present weak condition, mentally off the beam—"

"He is not! Or if he is, it's because Star Control pushed him so hard that —"

"Okay, okay. Whatever the reasons, whatever the exact state of his mind, Dr. Lloyd's not a prime specimen for their depth analysis. That's why they used my books."

Tsung's sighing breath had a wistful tremolo.

"I still find this very difficult to accept. That my mental being was once merely a series of clever words strung together in the pages of a fictional

book written in the twentieth century for the amusement of the rabble. Am I really only that?"

"No!" Brad cried with emphasis. "It was a very fine book, a hopeful book for millions. You must rationalize the phenomenon. Wouldn't everyone rather be an exceptional character created by an unusually perceptive dreamer than a run-of-the-mill dullard running around like an idiot trying to make sense out of our lives?"

"But if I am restricted to the Word—"

"The answer to that, Tsung, is that you aren't. If you were restricted to what happened in the book, we'd never have met and I could never have convinced you of the truth. We wouldn't be sitting here discussing your quixotic mind-pattern like this! Don't you see? There's far more to this than meets the eye."

He stared thoughtfully at the prismatic halo around the lama's head, fired to gold by the leaping flames.

"Yes." Tsung clasped his thin fingers together as in devotion. "Whatever else I am, my body is real. My thought patterns, even my physical characteristics, were stamped out of that old book, but when will I become aware of my true capabilities?"

Brad picked up a snapped branch and threw it back into the fire.

"When we find whatever did all this."

"Or," Harriet added softly, "when it decides to find us."

13

Harriet woke Brad with much agitation.

"What? What?" He yawned and rolled his humerus bones into their shoulder sockets and gave his head a characteristic shake to clear off the clinging cobwebs.

"Tsung's gone!"

"Gone?" He blinked around him, at the dead fire, the grassy patch and ring of the trees. When he caught sight of the lama bustling about with his stolid followers in the trees he turned to Harriet with a grouchy snarl. "What do you mean? Looks like they're fixing us breakfast. So you're complaining?"

He stretched his long, muscular body luxuriously and gestured her to the early group. The Mongolians had gathered a feast of fruits and berries. Even one of the game rodents roasted aromatically on a spit.

"Brad!" Harriet panted in a whisper. "There's something wrong. I can't explain it, but when I woke up I felt it, like a wave. They were pointing and whispering about us."

"You and your overactive ESP."

"No, honest, Brad—"

The beauty of the morning made Brad shake his head and wave away her qualms. He moved toward the sumptuous board hungrily and fell to. Tsung nodded welcome.

"Eat well," he urged. "We have a long journey before us."

"How about that, fresh meat!" Brad began wolfing down a succulent strip with drooling content. "How about you and your boys?"

"We have eaten," Tsung said. "In any case our religion forbids the eating of animal flesh."

"How about the killing of animal flesh?"

An expression of worry flitted across the lama's ascetic face. "Well-"

"Well what?" His hint of something odd did not prevent Brad's enjoyment of the unexpected feast.

"We do what we must."

Harriet said, "*Must*, Tsung? Why *must*?"

Tsung's lean, brown face became very bland and cautious.

"You are meat-eaters; you need strength for what is to come."

Brad let his meat drop. Harriet was right; there was something wrong, something different. The whole atmosphere of the camp had changed. During the night something had happened. Something invisible had entered Tsung's mind and the others' minds and made demands. He wiped his mouth and faced the lama.

Tsung, what is it? What happened last night?"

Tsung looked worried, but firm. The thing that had taken hold of him and the others, making them kill for food when killing was not of their Word, brooked no second choice. Brad read it in his liquid brown eyes. Tsung was, as always, politeness itself, but now a task had been programmed into his expanded mind. He must do it; he had no alternative.

Brad decided on a test to make sure.

"You and your men go any damn place you like. As for Harriet and me, we're going back to the other ship."

He stood up.

Tsung spread out his palms,

"I am sorry, Bradley Mantee, but you must come with us."

"Suppose we decide not to."

Tsung motioned to the men behind him; they moved in grimly. Brad saw now that they held weapons from Harriet's and his packs. They also had clubs and vine ropes. Their wide faces were suddenly no longer affable and easygoing; they were hard and tight.

"We are to guide you to a certain place as quickly as possible. You must come. If you don't come we must kill you."

"Kill!" Harriet cried. "That's against all your teachings! Totally against the Word!"

"Never mind the Word now. We have killed already to feed you, so that you will be in prime condition for your— interview. If you decide to fight us we must kill you both. There is no choice for either you or for us."

When they reached the lip of the wide, natural bowl of land where the dome rested, Brad gave a low whistle of approval. It was opaque and off-white, rather like an egg that had been sheered off on one end. There were no visible openings and, considering the teleportive efficiency with which his ship's accouterments had been removed, Brad thought it likely that there actually were no hatches or openings in the dome. What lurked within it had no need or desire to wander about alien environments subjecting itself to alien perils. It simply stayed within the huge dome and sent out its invisible probes to garner bits of the environment (including intelligent bits) into itself for analysis and assessment.

"Efficient," he murmured. "Way beyond us."

"It looks so—inert," Harriet said, "so harmless."

"Under that white shell it's probably seething with all kinds of mental activity."

"What does it want?"

"Us. The books were an experiment; we're real. It wants to find out what we and our galactic race is all about."

"I just thought of something. Why didn't it snatch us here like it did the stuff in your ship and Father? Why make Tsung bring us, on foot?"

Brad shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe it does have limits. Maybe it just chose to do it that way, checking our reactions out. Whether we'd try to kill Tsung or—"

"We *couldn't!*"

"That's one thing it found out by playing it this way." Brad blinked downhill. "I have an idea emotional empathy is not among its primary motivations. In fact—"

"You must walk down to the place," Tsung interrupted, with his newly acquired, brittle firmness. "It is down there." He pointed to a spot some fifty feet from the dome which wore a faint violet haze over it. It was hard to see but it was there.

"What is it?" Harriet wondered in a whisper.

"The way in, I expect, a space-warp of some kind that bounces you inside the dome."

Harriet wailed, "I don't want to!"

Brad turned to Tsung. "How about the girl staying here with you? After all, she can't get away. I'll provide it with all the information it wants. Besides," he grinned, "I'm curious. I've been around, but baby, this is something!"

Tsung shook his bald head.

"No. Both."

"Couldn't you at least make the request?"

"There is no way. Go!"

They went.

Harriet's eyes were bright with excitement and fear. Brad felt an electric jolt of intellectual pregnancy leap up from his insides and charge senses, nerves and muscles with its immense portent. He was about to learn much, including, probably, *why* the book people had been removed from their ancient pages and made real. *Not how, surely. The human brain is not capable of such knowledge. Other things. Other answers to nagging questions. Staggering answers to big, big questions. The creature within the dome must have unlocked science secrets which man would not begin to understand for a thousand years.*

He gripped Harriet's hand.

They stepped into the violet haze.

At this point even their escape, their probable elimination after the wanted information had been squeezed out of them, was secondary. Curiosity burned high.

Harriet's thoughts ended in a single focal drive.

"At least," she whispered, "I'll get to see my father."

If Brad was not so confident about it, he didn't say so. He nodded and held her hand tighter.

There was no sensation of any kind, no sound, no flash of light. Quite suddenly they were inside. There wasn't even the momentary irritation of a sudden viz-pic scene-change done for effect.

Brad stared around them into churning multi-colored mists that had striations and vague networks of odd, geometric patterns in an infinite maze.

"It reminds me of something," he said.

"Yes!" Harriet's audible heartbeat against him subsided somewhat as she found the dome was not a hotbed of hideous monsters with horrendous fangs. "The gelatinous threads that seem to hold the whole thing together! It's, it's like one of those huge demonstrative models of a single human cell!"

"That's it! Do you suppose it could be? I mean, if the environment where it came from was such that, instead of increasing the cells in number, one single cell increased in size and intelligence... the kind of intelligence that enabled it to create ambulatory servants or tools to do whatever needed to be done outside its—"

"*Bravo!*" a jolly voice • broke in with a chuckle. "That is not quite how it was, of course. Very different, in fact. But a good guess for a member of an inferior race."

"Thanks," Brad managed. "Thanks for the left-handed compliment." He peered all around him; there was nothing but the gentle movement of what seemed the protons and neutrons of a gigantic atom. "Where are you?"

"I am what you see. I thought you realized that much."

"You mean you're all of this? We're inside of *you*?" -The voice chuckled again. "Exactly. It is not necessary for more than one of us to make such a journey since we are connected by mind-link. But our purpose in permitting you to enter our shell was not to provide you with information but rather—"

"Wait! We aren't used to talking to a disembodied voice, even if it is sort of familiar. By the way, why is it familiar to me?"

"Start walking toward the throne and look around you." There was a new, pompous tone to this voice and a hint of regal thunder.

The throne was a long way down the high-ceilinged hallway and it was awesome. Suddenly Brad felt very, very small and his skin prickled as if it wasn't really skin at all.

"The Scarecrow!" Harriet exclaimed. "You're not Brad anymore! I can see your face *through* the patchwork cloth and the button eyes but—"

"You're a little girl in a pinafore," Brad grinned. "But who are these others walking alongside us?"

"Don't you know? This True Word I *do* remember. My mother—" *i*

"I'm scared," sniffed the Lion, to Brad's immediate right.

"You're not the only one around here who's frightened," clanked the Metal Man, who had taken hold of Harriet's hand on the other side. "Well, after all we've gone through to get to the Emerald City—let's face up to it and let the Wizard know what we came for!"

The long emerald hall led them to the wide bottom steps of a golden throne. The dumpy little man with the ruby nose and puffed, red cheeks to go with it wore a high conical hat over his white hair. The hat had very mysterious symbols on it.

When the little man stood up and glared at them with his shaggy, white eyebrows raised, the Lion fell flat on his face, whining and whimpering in terror.

The Wizard pointed his star-tipped wand at the Lion; the Lion vanished. He pointed his wand at the Metal Man, the Metal Man vanished, too.

"Now," he chuckled. "Now I presume you are comfortable, having been projected into one of the incredible milieus which your weird race indulges itself in?"

"It's not *quite* the way we usually do it."

"No? It was in the books."

"Sure, but those books aren't exactly a true representation of the way we normally function. In fact they—"

"Never mind! That's all we had to go on and I've made you comfortable by presenting myself before you in a manner which even an infant would find agreeable. We don't understand such incredible nonsense, of course, but since that is the way your minds work, we accept it for what it is worth." There was a testiness to his Frank Morgan voice which the Wizard's creator never intended. He had done what to The Mind behind all this was appalling and ridiculous, 'because the books were the only things it had to base its judgment upon. It was only now beginning to realize its error and that made the cell feel emotion; in this case, it was *anger*.

Brad began to understand. What would a super-intellectual non-emotional race imagine, finding those books and nothing else besides technical manuals? It must identify the books with their possessors; what was in the books must seem to be *what they were*.

The mind-link cell race had evolved strictly along lines of dead-serious science, much the way Star Control was now leading its galactic sheep. There was no nonsense, no delightful whimsey, no fantasy and no fiction of any kind. There were no artful dodgers of restrictive truths.

There was nothing but pure fact and cold logic.

This, started a nodule of an idea budding in Brad's racing brain.

"Your irrational thought-patterns make any level of intellectual communication very difficult," the Wizard was saying. "I read within those erratic cesspools of confusion you call minds that your comfort requires a visual focus while you are communicating. You cannot mind-link as we do, so you may call me the Wizard."

"Not a bad fictional prototype at all," Brad murmured.

"What is this *fiction* concept?"

"You have nothing like it where you come from? No art of any kind?"

The Wizard waved his wand irritably.

"Why should we? What possible use are falsities in the expansion of The Mind?"

"Why, they make you happy; they comfort; they provide a sense of awe and wonder to the lonely individual who finds the universe unfriendly and —"

"Individual!" the Wizard cried. "That seems to be the key! Your race is made up of individuals, *lonely* individuals. We of course have no such problems. Mind-link joins the cells of all our galaxy and makes any single cell the equiv-alant of All. Truth is Truth. Logic is Everything."

"Sounds peachy-keen," Brad said, fully aware that such an adjective would further irritate the cell in its characterization as the Wizard.

"Please."

The Wizard seemed to be fumbling around their minds, trying to find something like what it normally was able to link itself with. It didn't seem to be doing well.

Harriet said, "My father! Where is my father?"

"You refer to the frail individual we found unconscious in the primitive starship?"

"Where is he?" Harriet cried. "What did you do to him?"

The Wizard eyed her curiously. The characterized chuckle came again. "Your agitation is interesting. Why? What if we had thrown away this

debilitated member of your race? What difference? The cell has apparently served out its usefulness."

"He's my father!"

"We do not understand; from the vague meanings we read in your mind, we find the concept revolting, but then you don't reproduce by fission. Your method is copulative, like other low life-forms."

"Our lowest life-forms reproduce by fission," Brad pointed out.

"Brad, please!" Harriet seemed unable to grasp the fact that an emotional appeal was wasted on the Wizard, because he *looked* so amiable. "Let me see my father! Please!"

"No. Later, perhaps." The Wizard put his finger to the side of his nose and twinkled his eyes at her. "I will tell you that he is well, at least as well as any body and mind of its race and age can be expected to be. We gave him new flesh where new flesh was needed; we could not give him a new mind, unfortunately."

"Will I be able to see him before—"

"Before we dispose of the only two members of your race capable of warning others of our advent? Perhaps. For the time being I have endured enough of your cluttered egos. You will go away now."

"But where? What-"

"No more questions, though by your questions you have revealed more about your race than you have by your absurd answers. I must be totally alone for mind-link with my peers. Your weight within me is a physical and mental drain, as is the assumption of this ridiculous characterization. Mind-link at this intra-galactic distance is particularly difficult and—never mind! Out! Out! Go play down the rabbit hole with Alice and the Red Queen!"

14

Tsung greeted them on the rise with a good deal of his Shamure warmth returned. Brad guessed why; it was exactly what the Wizard's irritability had revealed before they were whisked back out. The cells communicated with one another by mind-link. Most likely the Wizard must consult with top level cells or perhaps with the totality of the race about what procedures were in order. Apparently, the mind-link race had never in its galactic history encountered anything quite like the human race. It would take very involved thought mechanisms to deal with all the new problems the cells faced in this galaxy, so far from any star they had ever touched before.

Mind-link at such a distance was extremely difficult. That was why the Wizard had dismissed them so rudely; it was why Tsung and the others were no longer captives. It was a drain on the cell to keep the Mongolians subjugated, just as it was a drain to have Brad and Harriet weighting down its physical body and confusing its mind with their emotional fantasies.

"They do have a weakness!" Brad told Harriet and the lama of the Word. "It's the thread that—"

"*Look!*" the girl cried out, point to the entrance place.

"Hey-it looks like Dr. Lloyd!"

Standing below them in the purplish haze was a small hunched figure wearing the dark tunic of an AAA-level SC scientist. He was scratching the white wisps of hair on his head and looking bewildered.

"Him, too!" Brad muttered to himself. "For super-distance mind-link the cell had to rid itself of his weight, too, which means..."

He followed Harriet's run down to the place. She seized both the startled old man's hands and wept. The physicist wagged his head and sniffled, his vague eyes staring at her and welling up because hers were; his lips_ trembled.

"It's all right, my dear," he mumbled, allowing Harriet to lead him out of the violet haze before the Wizard snatched him back. "I'm all right now; I feel just fine."

Harriet wept against him for a moment, then led him gently uphill. Brad followed, emotional because he knew what this meeting meant to Harriet after so much, yet nagged by suspicions. *Is Dr. Lloyd really all right? Is he even Dr. Milton Lloyd?*

"By the way," the little man asked Harriet, "who are you?"

"I'm your daughter! You never knew it, but—"

"Of course, of course!" The wispy pate gave a trembling nod, then several more, bobbing in childishly anxious agreement. "Of course you are my daughter. How could I have forgotten?"

It was Tsung who suggested that they remove themselves as far and as quickly as possible from the dome. His brown-faced countrymen agreed with alacrity. Now that the thing controlling their minds was gone they reacted toward it with abhorrence, much like the abhorrence Infadoos and his warriors had displayed when Brad had tried to urge them in this direction. Evidently their programmed minds retained some fragment of memory of where their lives had actually begun, and since it didn't agree with the True Word it was detestable.

The people from the nonexistent Lamasery were sharper and of a far different stamp, yet they had had a taste of take-over. They didn't like it.

"Any ideas where to go?" Brad asked Tsung.

"There is a deep valley not distant from here; a high cliff overlooks it. The valley is so lush, so verdant and beautiful, that at first we thought it must indeed be our Valley of the Blue Star!"

"But no Lamasery."

"No, unfortunately. We were mistaken." Tsung sighed.

"Say, why not build one there?"

Tsung was dubious.

"Why not? You'll have to settle somewhere, sometime. You can't just keep on the move, seeking a will-o'-the-wisp that exists only in a book! Use your knowledge of the Word; build your Lamasery. Make Shamure real!"

The slanted eyes flashed bright.

"Will the creature who brought us to life allow such a thing?"

"Why not? I have an idea about why they did it, brought you to life. The Wizard gave us a couple of hints. My idea is that they go around seeding worlds for future use. Instead of putting androids or non-indigenous creatures on a given planet, they use what they find there. In the case of Virgo all they found was my books. There's more to you than those book patterns, though. For one thing, flesh and blood —indigenous life-stuff, somehow. You *belong* here."

"And we are actually free agents who can use the Word or not use it, as we see fit. We may use it when it suits best, or parts of it, but discard it entirely when the time comes to do so. Our descendants will know only that much of the Word which we teach them."

"Right! This seeding's a long-range proposition. The cells want you to make your own lives, do your own things!"

"Perhaps. But in the fullness of time they will come back and make demands on us, as their creatures."

"So fight them then! Only now, build your world into something fine and wonderful. Show the kind of courage book heroes must! Defeat your would-be masters by using the very weapons they provided you with—the heroic hallmarks of the Words!"

Tsung smiled thinly.

"You make it sound easy."

"I know... Sorry. But you *are* heroes!"

"Provisional heroes," Tsung murmured, "unmotivated heroes, blundering through a world we were thrust onto fullblown, with no creators to write new Words." He gave Brad a long thoughtful glance. "What we need is a leader to bind us together, to make us truly men, men of viable and honest purpose."

15

A two-day trek brought them to Tsung's beautiful valley, which they named Shamure. The lama's eyes welled up as his trembling hand pointed high up to a break in the precipitous headland where, in the evening mists, the shadows raised a haunting vision of towering architecture, the illusion of Shamure Lamasery itself. It had been the most bitter discouragement their wanderings had brought them. Brad pointed out that the deep valley was thick with trees for lumber, trees which must be felled if they were to cultivate fields in this fertile Eden. By means of vine ropes and muscle, logs could be hauled up to the high ledge and Shamure could be made real. Modest at first, it would grow larger and more noble, until it would at last become an inspiration to all the heroes of Virgo. It would take work, drudging toil, but it would give them something to do that was fine, something to dream on. If they were masterminded from another galaxy by the cells, they could at least show their masters what was in them. There is dignity even in slavery if the slaves refuse to cringe.

There were shallow caves at the foot of the high cliff, where they made camp. The next morning, Brad and Tsung began to make plans for a permanent settlement, where other book people would be invited to come and live, sharing the benefits of a stable community.

Harriet looked up from feeding her father, spooning a kind of wild-rice porridge into his mouth. Dr. Lloyd showed no inclination to do anything himself. His hands remained limp at his sides; his eyes crinkled up pleasantly at whatever was said to him, good or bad. He did whatever he was told to do, poorly, but he did it.

Harriet's smile was bleak as she pricked up her ears to their mounting eagerness and excitement.

"Listen to you two! Have you forgotten the thing in the dome? Any time he chooses to, the Wizard will clamp down his controls and there goes all your fancy plans into a cocked hat."

"He hasn't so much as brushed my mind since we were forced to bring you to the dome." Tsung's eyes flashed.

"How do you know?"

"I know. I am trained to understand the subtleties of the mind, the so-called metaphysical forces and cosmic vibrations, more than most men. Therefore, I know there has been no intrusion." He turned hopefully to Brad. "Perhaps this cell was instructed by mind-link to remove himself from Virgo; perhaps the Wizard has returned to his home!"

Brad shook his head.

"I doubt it, and Harriet is probably right. The cell is keeping an eye on us."

"I'm sure he has no monitoring eye or ear on me, nor on my group," Tsung insisted. "In fact, since we have been making firm plans for lives of our own, related to the Word but not *of* the Word nor subject to its domination, I find the entirety of my mind soul fired with increasing vigor." He smiled. "This is in spite of my great age. We of Shamure do not age as rapidly as others." His eyes gleamed like black diamonds. "You have pointed the way," he told Brad. "You have taught us more than you know."

"Such as?"

"That if we rebel mentally, if we reject domination by the Word as *well as* by the cell itself, this dome dweller will find it increasingly difficult to control us at all. Eventually control will be impossible. All of the implications of the Word and areas of instinctive knowledge I have not yet plumbed tell me that this is true! If we reject mind domination it cannot happen, and I hereby reject it!"

Brad whistled while he stared hard at Tsung's transfigured face. He stood up, turned and moved rapidly toward the wood.

"Brad!" Harriet called. "Where are you going?"

"Hunting."

Since Tsung's people had resumed their taboo of killing for food, Brad's solitary expedition into the forest in search of small game was altogether logical. Harriet had her mindless father to fret about, whom she cared for as if she were his mother and he her backward child. Tsung and his apostles were happily occupied in the initial stages of building a new Shamure. With the crude but utilitarian bow slung over his shoulder and half a dozen imperfect arrows poked into his wide belt, Brad went across the greensward with springing steps.

He was going hunting, but not for small game. What he had learned from the Wizard had been percolating for two days and nights inside his mind, and what Tsung had

just told him fanned a weak ember of hope into a small flame. His ideas were only half formed, yet it seemed to him that somewhere among all those magnificent heroes must be one whose Word had the answer, one whose creator had endowed him with the perspicacity and cunning to defeat the Wizard. *Only one!* They were all brave to the point of *idiocy*, all intense as they could be about the urgency of battling any foe they met, loaded to the gills with high adventure and high purpose.

But that isn't enough!

The Wizard, the cell of the mind-link race, was an adversary far more powerful than any which their artful creators had hurled them against.

Striding under the random tapestry of thick foliage, Brad reviewed the books taken from his secret shelf. *Let me see... There was him, and them, and him.* The problem was in knowing which characters the Wizard had picked. Surely not all had struck its fancy. The selection seemed random, perhaps even desperate. The alien's logical nature had been outraged by emotion and lusty animism, yet it had gritted its nonexistent teeth and kept trying. Its job was to produce creatures like those which the strange galaxy harbored. That the books were fiction was an accident.

Brad grinned.

It's something to have led the galactic intruder down the garden path!

He stopped grinning and put his full attention on the task of determining which, if any, of the book people could help him defeat the Wizard. *Hard fists and naked swords are all very nice but they won't do it. Not even a little bit.*

Ticking off this book, eliminating that hero, Brad was left wallowing in dreamer Bunyan's Sea of Despond. *None of them will do, not a single one.*

Single.

Combination? Several heroes, each using his or her special Word-given talent?

His mind beating was interrupted by song.

"Who doth ambition shun, And loves to live i' the sun,

Seeking the food he eats,

And pleas'd with what he gets.

Come hither, come hither, come hither!"

Brad's breath caught; he froze. Then, drawn by the happy sound of male voices singing one of his fondest lyrics, he moved through the oaks until he came to a glade where wood smoke sifted up from a fire where an animal like a hind roasted over a spit.

" 'Act II. Scene I—The Forest of Arden.' " Brad gulped. " 'Enter DUKE Senior, Amiens, and other Lords, in the dress of Foresters

A lad in a medieval doublet and hose put by his lute. The Duke said, "Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile, Hath not old custom made this life more sweet than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods more free

from peril than the envious court? I have asked you these things oft, here around our bountiful fire, in this our newfound home. And is not your answer a gladsome 'Aye! Here we are content!' Speak it again, I pray thee, gentle comrades ,of Arden!"

They spoke the words obediently, but Brad thought much of the spirit had gone out of them from repetition. There were undercurrents of bewilderment and with some the words came grudgingly.

"Melancholy Jaques, come!" the Duke protested. "You were silent and your eyes turned away! What have you to say?"

"What can I say but this, my Lord: All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players; They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts..."

Brad stood still, breathless, while the majestic words rolled out; they came not from an actor this time, but a reality, thanks to the devices of a mind that had no idea what it was doing.

The Word rolled on to the end of Jaques' primary speech. There was a heavy silence around the fire. Brad only moved when a hand reached out from behind an oak trunk and shook his arm. He jumped back.

The noble in forest-green smiled.

"Jove, Jove, who have we here? A man for the greenwood life, I'll be bound! But what are you doing, lurking out here like a wolf? Come, bowman, join our beloved Duke and his comrades in exile! It shall be my pleasure to introduce you to each one, all nobly born, I assure you."

Brad stared at the man in the homespun doublet and cloak and the jaunty, feathered cap, who had a graying beard.

"I—I know them all."

"Dost, indeed? Then you must be Orlando, banished as well by the foul usurper, Frederick! Welcome. Trice welcome to the Forest of Arden! But where is your aged servant, the excellent Adam?"

"Still locked in the Word, I expect."

The look he received was critical. "Methinks thou doth jest, in a manner that likes me not. But come, stranger! Tarry not on the fringes of our greenwood bounty like John-O-Dreams!"

His arm went companionably around his shoulder and he led him to the fire.

Amiens was singing again, plucking the strings of his lute. Now his song accentuated the hidden sadness of their banishment, and what Brad read on their faces was the typical, unspoken confusion of men who had been snatched preemptively from the Word, who found the world about them awry and different than it ought to be. Their banishment was from somewhere quite different than medieval France.

"Blow, blow, thou winter wind, Thou art not so unkind As man's ingratitude; Thy tooth is not so keen, Because thou are not seen—"

"Hold! Hold thy doleful verses, young Amiens, pray! See what I have found in the forest and brought to you, Duke: Orlando, son of Sir Rowland de Bois, and no other! Welcome the lad hither and thou, Jaques, as well. He is your own flesh, is he not?"

Jaques stroked his beard and gave his long, sad face a cock. But the Duke rose and took Brad's hand warmly.

"Welcome, Orlando! We have awaited your coming as it was named in the Word, discussing it amongst ourselves and pondering the when of it. We love this day, for it is only second to that other great day yet to come, when my brother Frederick, hearing how that every day men of great worth have resorted to this forest, will address a mighty force here on foot with the purpose of taking me—"

"I must tell it, Sire!" Jaques cried. "Remember the Word!"

"Aye, tell it, then."

Jaques stood up and gave his cloak a wide theatrical sweep.

"—purposely to take his brother here, and put him to the sword: And to the skirts of this wild wood he came; Where, meeting with an old religious man who—by the way, Orlando, if you are he, did you perchance see such a won-derously wise, old religious mystic in your journey? One who could work such a miracle as to convert the Duke's brother from his wicked course?"

"As a matter of fact," Brad said, "I do know such a man. But I doubt if Frederick will ever meet him."

"Why not? It is True Word that he must meet him! What is this religious ancient's name?"

"Tsung. High Lama of Shamure."

"What heathen nonsense is this?"

There were murmurs of discomfort and a falling away from Brad, as if he had committed some grave crime. Brad sighed, remembering how it had been the same with In-fadoos, Zartan and all the others. Since they were creatures bom from the Word, it would be pulling teeth to wrench them away from what to them was greater than gospel. Yet he was sure that he must *blend* the Words, use bits of this one and that. He had to convince the Duke and his followers of the truth and remove them from the domination of the Word as he had removed Tsung and, through him, Tsung's men.

He needed all the help he could get. Tsung and those who walked with him, fired by the new, glorious dream of building their own Shamure on the high cliff, would all fight the Wizard. But Brad needed more. He could not pos-sibly cover the wide area which the book people had roamed by

himself, to recruit more fighters. Here was a noble handful who could help, *if* he could persuade them of the need.

I must be careful, though, stick to the script as much as possible, artfully lead them onto new paths, give them-new motivations which seemed to be only variations of the Word. For all their nobility of face and form, for all the splendid lines their creator had given them to speak, they're rather naive, actually. Their day in the Word had been a simple one, a day of swash and sword. It's no good bringing in super-galactic menaces to confuse them more than they are already.

Careful...

"Listen, my excellent comrades," Brad began slowly, trying as hard as he could to keep both the idiom and the sense of his words acceptable to them. "The false Duke, your brother, has enlisted the aid of a foul demon. This demon dwells within a wondrous castle in the shape of half an egg. Before any of you here can be restored to the lands and holdings which are rightfully yours this demon must be destroyed!"

"But the religious mystic!" the Duke protested. "You have seen this man! Can he not perform his duty in the Word and convert my brother Frederick? Can he not"—he winced over the alien ideas—"Can he not exorcise this foul demon?"

"Demons! Heathen mystics!" Jaques snorted. "What Wordless nonsense is this!"

"There are more things in heaven and earth,' good Jaques," Brad quoted evenly, "'than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' "

The Duke scowled across the fire as he began to pace.

"Truly, this doth sound like Word, 'though it be not. How say you, Orlando?"

"This is not my brother Orlando," Jaques said with sour emphasis.

"Art certain of this?"

"Do I not know my own younger brother!"

The Duke wagged his bearded head, screwing up his benevolent face into a ponderous knot.

"If I am not Orlando, which indeed I am not," Brad said softly, "then you must admit that there are other Words, and there is the possibility of variations in the True Word."

The Duke worried his peppery beard. "I have seen things here in the forest which I do not truly deem to be of the Word. We wait and wait but the Word proves itself not."

"Aye, good Duke," trebled Amiens. "For an example, where are the wild winds my songs tell us of? Where are the snows? We live here in the forest we discovered after our—our banishment and we love it dearly. Yet I, who see it with an artist's sharp eyes, would not call it True Word!"

Brad was gratified at the solemn nods and significant murmurs which followed. He was making progress.

"But *demons!*" Jaques exclaimed scornfully. "This is too much!"

"You must believe it when you see the Egg Castle for yourself," Brad said. "But before that happens, we must recruit all the help we can find in this fair land, to battle the fiend. Each one of you must help in the recruiting; and there is no time to waste! Who knows when the fearful monster in the Egg Castle will decide to strike?"

16

It was several days later when he stumbled weak-legged and hungry back into the camp. Harriet ran to meet him. Brad put his arm around her with a grin, as much to hold himself up as anything else.

"Where were you?" she begged. "We've been worried to death about you."

"I—I've been hunting, like I said. Never mind. What's been going on? Any sign of the Wizard?"

Harriet shook her head, leading him to a seat by the evening fire, where Dr. Lloyd was mumbling over a wild-rice cake and smiling inanely. He wagged his pate and his gnawed cake at Brad.

"Naughty, naughty!".

Brad gave the physicist a sour glance; but when Harriet touched his arm, he revised it into a fast little smile and a flick of the hunched shoulder in passing. Since he was very tired, he wasn't quite able to falsify old grievances such as the deaths of the astronauts at Project Yonder, nor the theft and crash of his SS. *And something else? Something not quite kosher behind those vague, lackluster eyes?*

Harriet hurried to bring Brad food.

"What's he mean, 'naughty, naughty'?"

"Just how much you worried us. He's heard me talking about you all these days you were gone. I'm afraid I did quite a lot of it; I was so scared, Brad! Where—"

He brushed off her questions, eyeing her father over the rim of his wooden trencher, held up close the better to wolf his food.

"Are you sure that's it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. No questions, don't ask me any questions just now."

"You're tired to the bone, aren't you? What you need is sleep; we can talk tomorrow." She moved back into the shadow. "I'll plump up your bough bed. I—I gave Father your sleeping bag. Okay?"

Brad nodded absently.

"Where's Tsung?"

"I don't know," Harriet called. "He and the others have been busy as beavers. Wait'll you see how much they've got done. Tsung's been sleeping with his men down in the huts near their work. Come, your bed's all ready, Master!"

Brad finished eating and crawled on all fours to the rear of the cave. He was so weary from three days without sleep that he ignored her silent figure entirely, until, just before the curtain of sleep rolled down, he felt her hand on his forehead. It was cool and pleasant when he took hold of it and drew it across his lips.

"Brad, please tell me—"

"No questions, baby. Tomorrow."

The next day seemed to come the next minute. It was as though Harriet had never left him when she shook him gently but urgently. In any case he'd been too beat to do anything about it if she had stayed.

"Brad, something's wrong!"

His quick glance around showed him everything that was in their camp, with added housewifely touches Harriet had provided during his absence. There was the morning cooking fire, the skyline of misty forest and Dr.

Lloyd still senilely munching, as if he had never stopped, sopping his cake in bark tea.

"Your father!"

"Brad! How can you say—no! It's Tsung! Look!"

The lama's tall figure, cowled against the driving mist, was moving with swift purpose toward the cave. Behind him came the others. Their wide, blunt faces appeared grimly inimical as they followed Tsung up the path in a serpentine line. They carried machetes and clubs, as they had once before.

Brad moved down to meet them.

"Not again, Tsung!"

The parchment brown face attempted a smile.

"I'm afraid so."

"You mean the Wizard's got hold of your mind again? I thought you decided that if you wouldn't let him control you, he couldn't."

"I was wrong." Tsung's face was a dry mask but somewhere in his slanted eyes was an apology. "The Mind is too vast. It has me, I'm afraid. One part of me abhors it, but the part which controls my physical movements is helpless. To this extent I was right." He gestured toward his men. "In any case, my poor countrymen are completely taken over. As you see, they are quite capable of killing you both if you do not do what The Mind tells us you must do."

"Both? What about him?" Brad nodded at Dr. Lloyd.

"He is—"

"Already controlled?" Brad finished brusquely.

Tsung nodded.

"I thought so. Whatever mind the accident left him with, it's the Wizard's tool. He plays idiot, but he's really watching every move we make, reporting. He's their bug."

Tsung sighed. Harriet started to run to her father. The sudden change in him, the penetration of his eyes and the firming of his facial expression, stopped her with a cry.

"It doesn't matter any more, Harriet," Brad told her. "Don't you see? Dr. Lloyd didn't really survive the ship crash. That's a skillful patch-up of his body, but nothing else. I don't quite know how I guessed it but I did. You wouldn't, of course; you wanted what you'd come so far to find too badly." He turned to Tsung. "Well? Now what, the dome?"

Tsung nodded.

Again Tsung and his followers were left on the bowl's rim to await the Wizard's pleasure. Brad thought, while he and Harriet were moving hand in hand to the place of the violet haze, that this move expressed sublime confidence in The Mind's power over its creatures. Was it overconfidence, perhaps? Brad was far from ready to rely on such tenuous threads of hope. There were too many unformed ideas churning in his head, too many wild emotional torrents caused by too much exposure to too many heroes out of too many Words.

Dr. Lloyd's mind contact had told the Wizard all about Tsung and his high resolves. The Wizard, by re-controlling Tsung and his less spiritual followers, had convinced himself that the book creatures were incapable of true resistance. Brad had other hopes, but they were thin and nebulous. He was in a sweat.

They were inside the cell again, facing Dorothy's jolly, little Wizard.

"Well, Dorothy? Well, Scarecrow?"

The scorn the alien had borrowed from the character it had assumed was lively but spurious. The mind behind it had virtually no emotion, and that

was the basis of Brad's faint hope. What The Mind could not understand or tolerate was still the best weapon against it.

"You can drop the charade, Wizard," Brad said.

The figure on the throne put its finger to its nose and chuckled.

"You say drop the charade, suggesting that we call you by your correct names, yet you call *me* Wizard! Is that not a contradiction? Shall we not show some semblance of uniformity, logic?"

"You didn't show much logic about the way you grabbed people out of my books. Why didn't you at least follow through with one group, say Dickens, Dumas, or Shakespeare?"

The Wizard frowned. He gave his wand an airy wave.

"These creatures were casual experiments. We had nothing but the books to go on, so we took a few from each. There is a logic to our method which you have no way of knowing. When we seed a selective planet we take care not to draw too many primitives from one particular tribe or area. They must not become too intelligent too fast; divergence does the trick. Then we can shape them to suit ourselves."

"But you don't shape them. You leave them to their own evolutionary devices until they've ripened to your uses, right?"

The Wizard's eyes twinkled.

"But this is marvelous! You do have a brain in that preposterous body! When I say we shape them I mean, of course, that we extrapolate their potential through a hundred generations and choose those which will have the raw life-force treatment and which will not. It's all a matter of selection. As you say, we *do* bring them into being, using our raw life-force and the raw materials of the seed planet, carefully choosing those creatures which —"

He chortled cheerfully, quite as if he actually were spelling out ABC's to a little girl from Kansas and a straw-headed scarecrow. To *The Mind*, Brad and Harriet's level of intelligence seemed only slightly higher.

This was its logical thought.

Because of their emotion-sensitive minds. And yet, Brad told himself for the hundredth time, *The Mind*, having long

ago dropped emotion in favor of pure logic, had no way of knowing that these very quixotic sensitivities of human nature contained worlds of potential power of which they knew nothing.

Have not humans, good or bad, swayed millions by pure emotion? It was within such combined forces that Brad's hope was anchored.

But it was not enough.

True, there were other areas to consider, mystical areas, such as Tsung and his lamas exemplified. The Christs and the Buddhas of ancient Earth had not worked their world-shaking power merely by emotionalism. There was more; it was something elusive, nameless, cosmic. These metaphysical areas within nature and the stars were tapped *through emotion*. Certainly not through logic, for they were not logical.

It was true that Brad's galaxy, under Star Control, had lost most of this ancient mysticism and white magic. *But here on Virgo it lives again within the hearts and souls of the Word people.* The great dreamers who had created the Words and the followers of the Words had believed in wonder. They had had to believe in wonder, else they could never have fashioned such sublime dream-seeds as now walked the small planet.

Their creatures lived, by the Wizard's casual error.

Brad felt hope flame through him.

The Wizard must have felt it, too.

"Of course, before we remove ourselves from this planet we shall eliminate them all. Mistakes like this do happen; . not often, but they do happen."

Harriet wailed, "Not all of them! They can't hurt you! How can they?"

"They are mistakes; mistakes must be expunged. I'm sure that your Star Control feels the same way."

"Yes!" Harriet blurted. "They have no more conscience than you do about destroying races of primitives who happen to disagree with SC about what is progress and what isn't." She shook Brad's arm. "Don't you see now what you've been working for all your life? Don't you see? What SC is moving toward, as fast as it can is—*him!*" She flung an accusing finger at the Wizard.

"Is this the time for love-dove polemics, when a worldful of heroes is about to be snuffed out by alien invader?"

"I couldn't help it," Harriet choked. "These things pop out. I guess this will show you how wrong you were!"

"How wrong I was! I'm to blame for every misjudgment SC ever made, of course—personally!"

"I didn't mean that," Harriet said. "But I had to point out how much Star Control is just like this—this—"

"Say anything you wish my dear," the Wizard chuckled. "To us it is a compliment. This ranting and raving between you indicates how incredibly primitive you are. Lack of unified behavior and all the seething emotionalism it engenders points up-how ridiculously simple it will be for The Mind to take you all over, when the time comes." The chubby figure bowed blandly. "Thank you, my dear. Thank you for telling us all about your Star Control and its fumbling attempts to bring order out of intellectual chaos. It is just such bits of information which The Mind uses in its grand sweep across the stars. Thank you, Dorothy!"

"Thank you," Brad iterated glumly, "*Dorothy!*"

"Brad, I'm sorry!"

"Forget it." He turned to the Wizard. "You mentioned something about life-force? Something you carry with you in your cell and combine with raw materials from the planet to be seeded. Would you mind relieving my curiosity by telling me just exactly what form this—"

"Sorry, Scarecrow, there is no time. Our task was to draw out a bit more knowledge about what lies beyond this small star on the doorstep of your galaxy. We have, I think, gleaned quite enough, as much from your behavior as from any precise information you have given us. In any case, the energy drain has been far more than we have ever expended before; we must return to Yonder at once. But first," the Wizard waved his wand significantly, "we must clean up the mess, expunge our grievous errors." Unlike yourselves, we are a tidy race; we never leave debris and pollution behind us on the worlds we visit."

"You mean kill us!"

"Exactly; I prefer expunge. There is no residuum for the next visitor here to mull over."

Harriet clutched Brad's arm. "Brad! What can we do?" The Wizard answered her with a chuckle. "Nothing, nothing at all. Goodbye, Dorothy. Goodbye, Scarecrow."

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Delay. Delay tactics. That was the fine edge of Brad's hope. Our hope and all those wonderful book-people out there—bemused yet rich with high courage and sense of adventure. Yes, we're emotional. Emotion is the breath of our lives: joy in living, reckless laughter in the face of peril, love, burning hate. The book people are all the hopes and dreams those put-upon ancients had hoped and dreamed. All the fine sense of wonder, the awe, the fantastic glory. The revelings in conscious, sensate existence!

Die? How can they die! Burn the books if you must, destroy their shells, but the dreams will arise again from the ashes!

Brad watched the Wizard shimmer and fade.

"Wait!"

His urgency brought the Wizard back.

The chubby little face grimaced.

"There is no time; the link is already weak from so much energy expended. We must waste considerably more when we expunge you two and the mistakes."

"Sorry about that. But—won't you let me die with just a fragment of my curiosity satisfied? I mean, we of Star Control never dreamed of a race as—as evolved as The Mind! Just a couple of very small answers—*please?*"

The Wizard wagged and teetered. Never had the cell encountered anything quite so passionate. It was stimulating and, in a way, refreshing. *So different from the usual animal types. This absurd little scarecrow of a soi-disant intellectual being is so very anxious. Bare inches from the effort which will sweep him and the other blunders into oblivion, what can it matter? In Us own way, the whole experiment, mistakes and all, has provided The Mind with new fields of thought. Next time...*

"Very well. Two questions. No more. Hurry!"

Brad took a deep breath.

"The life-stuff you bring to your seed-planets, what is it?"

The Wizard chuckled.

"No you don't, Scarecrow. It would take me days to even attempt to explain it. Suffice to say that it is a miracle of our chemical genius; we grow it artificially from the genetic building-blocks from which all life evolves."

"Chemical! Artificial! Yet I'd swear that Zartan and In-fadoos and the Duke—and above all, Tsung—are not merely tools!" Brad took another prodigious breath, then let it out in a low long whistle of discovery. "It's what you take from the planet itself, the raw materials *and something else besides*, that makes the difference! I think I understand about the raw materials. They're what each individual planet will ultimately use itself in its natural evolutionary processes in the development of thinkers and builders. But there's got to be something else! What? What? *What?*"

"It varies," the Wizard chuckled, putting his finger to his nose craftily. "This star is, we think, unique. There was already a kind of important life here, a microscopic kind of life that did more than just permit us to stamp out book people like cardboard, something that actually *involved* itself with our experiments..."

"The emerald halos!" Brad yelled. "Harriet! Don't you see? The book people aren't rubber stamps! Virgo's microscopic symbiotes were just itching for full-blown intelligent life to come along. Tsung was so right; his mystic's intuition told him that the planet itself had provided the real essence of his thinking being. The halos! Before they'd only had low-level life. The Mind provided them with much more and—hurry, Harriet, hurry! *Tell Tsung! Tell the Duke!*"

Harriet stared openmouthed, then she nodded.

"You mean—what brought me to Father."

"Yes, use every bit of ESP you've got in that cute little mind of yours and say, 'Now, heroes! now!' "

They were in the place again, but the purplish mist was gone. The cell in the dome had withdrawn the last bit of its mind energy in its urgent need to depart from Virgo.

That they stood there alive was a miracle, a major miracle. But it was not quite as overwhelming as the miracle Brad saw when he was able to turn and blink up at the rim of the low hill.

They were up there, as many of them as Brad and the Duke and the Duke's men had been able to find in three days, and as many more as those recruited had been able to add to their numbers since.

They made a gorgeous splash of color and motion and excitement on the bright horizon, living shadows from so many of Earth's most picturesque eras: sword wielders, spearmen, spacemen with awkward, primitive ray-guns, splendid savages, plumed gallants, Mississippi urchins with bare feet, droll little dance-hoppers, Infadoos and his warriors, Zartan with his pachyderms trumpeting in the distance, Deena and her reformed friends, and the three swashbucklers of the drunken camp.

In the center, holding their single-minded attention and directing their emotion-charged thought down on the dome, was Tsung.

"What are they doing?" Harriet cried.

"Focusing all their mind and soul power on the cell, stopping it from going back, breaking the mind-link. Come on!"

He grabbed hold of her hand and ran toward the flamboyant crowd atop the rise.

"You!" Harriet panted. "You located them when you were off 'hunting' and prepared them for this!"

"With an assist from Dukes and lute players, and especially from Tsung."

"But you didn't tell Tsung anything about this! I'd have heard you and so would my—"

"That's why I couldn't. Luckily Tsung understood *without*

me having to tell him. Our lama's a canny one, all right; that mystic's intuition of his made the barest hint a revelation. When the Duke and all the others showed up he knew what they were there for; he was only waiting for my signal, which *you* gave him just in time. So you see, darling," Brad said, "we all did our bit."

They soon reached Tsung, who, like all the others, continued to be grimly preoccupied with the destruction of the dome.

"Look, Brad!"

"I'm looking," Brad whispered. "We're out of it, of course. It's their emerald halos, their symbiotes; the microscopic hangers-on and helpers don't want to lose the miracle The Mind's blundering gave them. See how they're gathering in one seething, bright cloud over the heroes' heads! They're in this thing, too!"

"But will it work? Will it be enough?"

"Think positive, like the ancient dreamers who started all this. They've got to do it. The mind-link was weak to begin with; overuse of the cell's permissible supply of energy weakened it further; and now—"

He stared down at the dome. Although it had once seemed so inert, so imperturbable, so smug, it glowed with white, atomic fires. It glowed and pulsed, as the living thing within it flailed its being against the walls of its

shell in a vain effort to lift and soar across the stars without the necessary link with The Mind.

It fought; it seethed; it expended every iota of its self-contained energy.

"It's cracking open!" Harriet cried. "Like an eggshell!"

Thus, without the whole Mind to help it, the cell spilled out in a wave of gaseous putrefaction and died.

The exultant yell that roared up into the bright stars above Virgo had many voices, jubilant, heroic voices, shouting defiance to Fate itself. These were impossible creatures, born out of dreams, and if *that* could happen, then no Mind, however logical and vast, could subdue or destroy them.

Tsung alone was silent. Reverently silent, he shed tears of happiness, his lips trembling prayers to his gods.

"Now," Harriet murmured, "I suppose we must go back."

"Back to Star Control and all that? Yes, I suppose we must. It's our obvious duty to go back and warn SC of what lies out Yonder."

"Brad, I was thinking..."

"Don't tell me, let me guess. You were thinking that I know all these splendid chaps and gals—from the Words and that you'd like to get to know some of them, too, before we refuel your ship and take off."

"In a way. Also—"

"Sure, I'm way ahead of you." Brad brushed a kiss across her nearest ear. "You were thinking that it would be nice of us to help Tsung, who after all saved our lives, to finish building Shamure— Maybe add our own touches, make it a sort of shrine of inspiration for all the heroes."

"And for us, too." Harriet blinked at the whirling bits of green fire that were returning to their individual halos around each heroic head, even the

elephant's heads. "I was wondering, Brad. Do you really think you and I will ever rate happy little armies of symbiotes like those?"

Brad grinned.

"Shall we stick around and find out?"