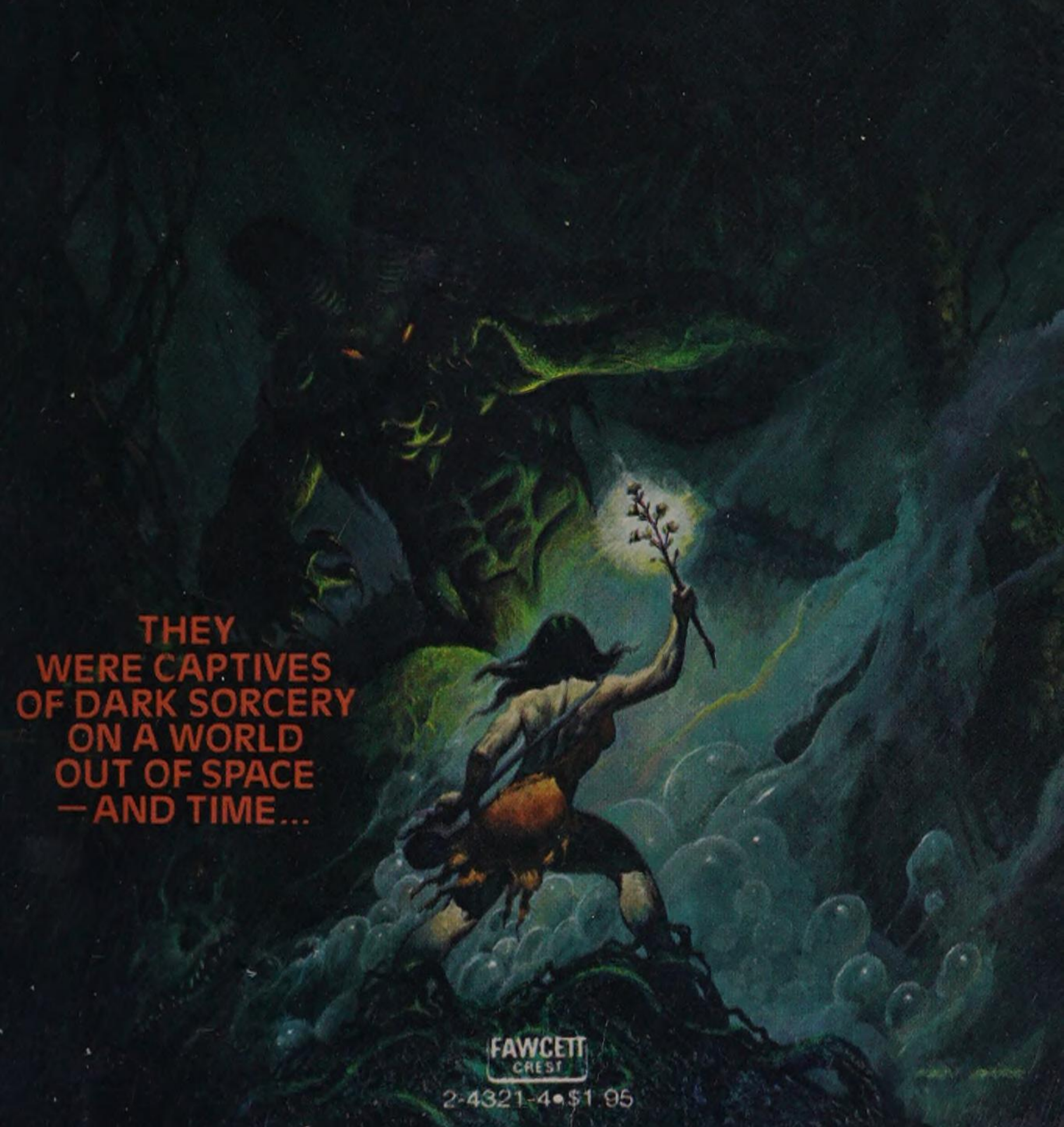
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"Oomark, you want to get away from this place, this whole world, don't you?"

He did not raise his head to face me squarely, but shot a look at me in an odd, sidewise fashion. With a second shock I saw that his eyes were no longer a warm brown but hard and glinting gold, such as I had never seen in a human face before.

"Away from here—" he echoed. "Yes, please, Kilda! Before the thing comes back!"

"Oomark, do you still know where Bartare is?"

Another glance from those golden eyes. "I always know. She doesn't care—not any more."

"Why?"

"Because . . . because it doesn't matter now. . . ."

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THIS BOOK CONTAINS THE COMPLETE TEXT OF THE ORIGINAL HARDCOVER EDITION

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1

But a few days ago (I shall never trust the divisions of time again and say with any certainty, "This is a day; that is a week; we face a year!") I was shown some very ancient tapes, copied, I was assured, from ones that had been made originally on fabled Terra. And some aspects of the information they stored were so like my own experiences that I could only believe that those who had first recorded them, back in a mist of time so great that I could not count the planet years—any more than one can truly give sum to the number of stars—had followed a trail like that which chance and my own stubbornness set me.

Had I not invincible proof of what had happened to me and several others, I might be judged now to be spinning some comet-hair tale for the astonishment of the credulous. But this much is true, and records prove it. I was born on Chalox in the planet and space-time year of 2405 After Flight. I was between sixteen and seventeen years old, planet age, when I left Chalox to land on Dylan. I am still no more than a year older—yet the year is now 2483!

Time! Sometimes, when I look squarely at those dates and think how those years fled for me, it brings back such fears that I must busy myself feverishly about some task, putting all my strength and thoughts into it, until the surge of panic that chokes me lessens. Were it not for Jorth, whom I can reach out and touch,

who shares my burden, I might— But of that I shall not think at all—now or ever!

As I say, I was born on Chalox. My father was Rhyn Halcrow, a Survey scout. He was of Talgrinnian stock, which means Second Wave, Terran outspread. My mother was a Forsmanian, of a trading family. They were human, too, but of the First Wave outspread, and had mutated from what is believed to be the original Terran.

Their marriage was a planet one as is usual for a man in the services, and it lasted three Chalox years. After the ceremonial break-bond, my father was assigned to a new outwave exploratory pattern. He left my mother with the excellent life pension of a planet wife and her freedom to contract another tie if she wished—or if her father wished, for the Forsmanians are strictly family oriented, with the eldest male making the major decisions for the clan.

Within a matter of months, my mother did take another husband, one of her cousins, thus keeping her first grant-for-marriage dowry strictly within the clan, in what her people considered a very practical and equitable arrangement.

As for me, I was already established in the crèche for Service children at Lattmah. The break was complete. I never saw either of my parents again. That I was a girl presented a minor problem, since the majority of such cross-births are male and the offspring trained from childhood for government service.

Unfortunately, I inherited my mother's sex but my father's spirit and interests. I would have been supremely happy as a scout, a seeker-out of far places and strange sights. My favored reading among the tapes were the accounts of exploration, trading on primitive planets, and the like. Perhaps I might have fitted in with the free traders. But among them women are so few and those so guarded and cherished that I might have been even more straitly prisoned on one of their spaceports, seeing my mate only at long intervals,

bound by their law to remarry again if his ship was reported missing for more than a stated time.

As it was, I did what I could to prepare myself for a possible escape from Chalox. I became a keeper of records, adept in several techniques, including that of implanted recall. And I had my name down—Kilda c' Rhyn—on every possible off-planet listing as soon as the authorities allowed me to register.

That no opportunity presented itself began to worry me. I was less than a year from the time when I could no longer stay at the crèche but would arbitrarily be fitted into any niche those in charge might select. They might even return me to my mother's clan, and such was not for me. So, in desperation, I appealed, at last, to the one among my teachers whom I thought the most sympathetic.

Lazk Volk was a mutant crossbreed. The mixing of races in his case had resulted in certain deformities of body that even the most advanced plasta-surgery could not correct. But his mind showed such a potential for learning and teaching that he had never left the crèche. Through his vast tape library and the visits of scouts and other far travelers to his quarters, he had gained knowledge far outstripping any local memory bank except the government one.

Because in some small ways we were alike, each yearning for what was denied us, Lazk Volk and I became friends. I had served for four years as recorder and librarian for him when I voiced my fear of being without a future, save one not of my choosing. I was hoping that he might answer with an offer of steady employment. Though that would be no true solution to my desire to travel, I would have, in his wealth of knowledge, the second best.

He stretched out his thin double arms in a gesture habitual to him, wiggling his boneless fingers above the keyboard that produced anything he might wish—from the complete history of the planet Firedrake to a dinner-of-first-ceremony. With most of his misshapen

figure muffled in a robe of Bora rainbow cloth, rippling rich color at his slightest movement, he was like a thick bolster perched on one end. Only his four arms and his conical head showed he was a living being.

For the second time he flicked his wiggling fingers back and forth. Then his slit of a mouth opened.

"No."

"No? Why?" I was startled enough to use a demanding tone that I would never have tried with him ordinarily.

"No—I do not take you into my service. That is the easy way, Kilda. And you are not meant to walk easy roads." He pressed one of those many buttons now, and my chair spun about so that I no longer faced him, but rather the wall on which was a projection screen, now like a huge mirror.

"What do you see?" he asked.

"Myself."

"Describe!" His tone was such that we might be in one of the training booths where he had begun to shape my mind for the retention and collection of knowledge.

"I am a woman. My hair—it is—" I hesitated. Those living in the crèche were so varied from crossbreeding that we had no norm of either good looks or downright ugliness. I knew that certain kinds of faces, coloring, forms gave me pleasure to look upon. But I had no vanity, nor any idea as to whether I could be deemed even passable in appearance. "My hair," I began again resolutely, "is of the color dark brown. I have two eyes—which are blue-green—one nose, a mouth. My skin is also brown, but lighter in shade than my hair. For the rest—my body is humanoid, and it is healthy. What is it that you wish me to see—other than this?"

"You have youth. And though you list your attributes so baldly, Kilda, you will discover, once you walk beyond these walls, that you will be considered above the ordinary in the sight of most. And, as you note, you have an adequate and healthy body. Therefore, you shall not waste this by crawling into shadows and turning your back upon the world."

"It is better," I protested, "to stay where I am happy than to be returned to a Forsmanian clan house or to be a clerk in some government hive until I become as dull-witted as the walls about me."

"Perhaps so." He nodded. I was surprised at winning my point so easily. Then he went on. "But you cite only two of the possibilities now before you. There are others—"

"Trade marriage?" I ventured the third I had considered.

"As a means of escape? I think not. The traders are too careful of their women, having so few of them. You might find such an alliance even more stultifying than your first two suggestions. There is this—"

He must have pressed another of his buttons, for there flashed on the screen, obliterating my own image, a government announcement. It was one of those general offers to emigrants, a fulsome and probably much overstated listing of all the glowing opportunities awaiting the properly qualified on a frontier planet.

"You forget"—though I did not see how he could—"that I am not hand-promised, nor am I medically trained, nor—"

"You are in a very negative mood." But he did not sound impatient. "This is the official listing. There are other possible ways of joining such a company, namely as a house aide for someone with children of a teachable age. You have given assistance in the classes here. And certainly your training is above that of such aides. The position would be temporary, of course, but it gives you a chance for emigration. And on a new world there will be more opportunities. There is a tendency—unless the emigration group is that of some close-knit religious sect—to be less rule-bound on a frontier world. You might well have such a position there as is barred to your sex on these inner planets."

What he said made good sense. There was only one flaw.

"They may think me too young."

"Your recommendations will be of the highest." He

said that with such confidence that I had to believe he had thought the whole matter over and only my consent was needed.

"Then—then—I'll do it!" I had always imagined that if I were offered any chance to leave Chalox and lift into the unknown of the far stars, I would do it without a moment's hesitation. Yet now that I said I would go, I found an uneasy stirring within me. It was as if, now that the door stood open, I was far more conscious of the safety of the room it guarded.

"Well done!" He brought my chair around to face him again. "But remember, Kilda, I only provide the means for your first steps; the march beyond is up to you. This much will I do for you. I shall appoint you one of my off-world reporters. You shall keep your skill sharp by taping for me anything that you think may add to this library."

I felt some easing of that tension within me. Now a spark of excitement lit in my mind. There was probably little enough I could add to the great wealth of material from a thousand—a hundred thousand—worlds that Lazk Volk stored. But were even a few sentences of mine thought fit to be included, I would be honored indeed.

"So it is decided." He spoke briskly. "The rest you will leave to me. Now—I want a run-through of the Ruhkarv report in comparison with the tridees from Xcothal."

I busied myself in producing the two tapes of archaeological mysteries for his viewing. With one thing and another, three days went by filled with work. In fact, I was so busy tracing down buried facts—which had not been called for for years—that on the third night, as I returned to my room to kick off my toe slippers with a sigh, I had the suspicion that Lazk Volk was keeping me running from one end of the archives to the other for some purpose of his own.

On the fourth morning when I reported for work, I found him not barricaded by rows of tape containers, but sipping a cup of caff and staring at his projection

screen as if it bore lines of formulae. He looked at me sharply as I came in and then used his lower right hand to indicate a box of some size on the corner of his desk.

"Take that and put on its contents. You have an interview at the tenth hour with Gentlefem Guska Zobak. She is staying at the Double Star."

"Put what on—"

"Clothing—proper clothing, girl! You go out in the city in that"—he nodded to my crèche dress, a one-piece garment planned for service and for neither fit nor show—"and you will be the center of attention, which, I assume, you would not care for."

To that I agreed and took the box into the storeroom beyond. But I was a little surprised at the contents. I did have one utilitarian robe, which I wore into the city on the few errands that took me there. It was as plain as the uniform and, like it, shouted that it was institutional wear. But these brilliant lengths of silky material were very different. I had seen such worn—but only by the daughters of landed families.

There was a pair of loose trousers of a darkly rich plum shade. Over those went a tunic of the same color, but a different material, for it was thick and had a texture like fur. This had long sleeves coming to the knuckles, and it was latched from belt to throat with a series of silver buckles. A belt of the same metal drew in the waist tightly.

My hair was much shorter than that of any woman outside the crèche. But there was a long veil of silvery net, with the eyeholes ringed with glitter, to cover my head, dropping to my hips in the back, to the waist in front. In such clothing I was disguised, and certainly none of my fellow students would know me.

When I went back to Lazk Volk and caught sight of my reflection on the mirror screen, I was so astounded as to let out a small gasp. He nodded, and at the same time he pushed a transportation plaque to me.

"Very good." He approved my masquerade, for such I felt this clothing to be. "Gentlefem Zobak is bound for the planet of Dylan. She has two children, a son

and a daughter, both quite young. Not being in robust health, she has applied for a house aide. Her husband is only temporarily stationed on Dylan—for about two years planet-time, I believe. I do not think the Zobaks will stay longer. But they have the power to ask for extra service, and if you please them, they might open other doors for you. Now, you had better go. It would never do to keep the Gentlefem waiting."

It might not do for me to keep my prospective employer waiting, but it was plain when I reached the Double Star that the situation was not the same for her. I was shown into an outer reception room, where I found others before me. There were two women seated there, with the look of those having waited perhaps already too long. Since we all followed the custom of keeping our veils down with strangers, all I saw of them was their clothes, much like those I wore, but differing in color and material. I spent some of the tedious time in trying to place my fellow employment seekers.

One wore rusty brown. I noted two mended slits in her veil. And the hands that showed (her sleeves were significantly shorter than mine) were red and roughened as if she had done hard work with them. I gained an impression of harassed middle age. The other, sitting across from me, wore blue, but there was something cheap about the too extreme cut of the tunic (with sleeves that touched the fingertips in an arrogant boast of the gentility of a wearer who did not have to worry about using her hands). And not only were the eyeholes in her veil edged in glitter (those of her neighbor being bound in plain material), but they were also of a width to bedazzle the viewer.

The work-worn woman was summoned first and did not reappear; then my companion of the over-glitter, who did not return either. I guessed there must be another door for leaving. Finally, the servo robot jerked a beckoning prong in my direction.

The room I entered was a standard luxury one of a caravansary. But its present occupant had introduced

other elements. She lay in the bed, its back elevated to give her support, the surface before her strewn with a variety of objects either dedicated to amusement or to the care of her person.

I politely threw back my veil to meet her eyes. She was small and very delicate in appearance. Her hair had been fashionably bleached and retinted to a very brilliant green, striking against the pallor of her skin. She represented the height of fashion as I had seen it on telcasts.

Though there were two easirests waiting to comfort occupants, she waved me to a backless stool-cushion near the bed and stared at me without speaking for a long moment. She had a fretful look about her mouth, and her hands were seldom still, rummaging among the things that lay on the bed before her, though she never looked down at what she picked up, nor, indeed, held it long.

"You are Kilda c' Rhyn." She did not make a question of that, rather a statement, such as one would use in naming an object—as if, were I *not* Kilda, she would make me so. I wondered if such was meant to unsettle one, a tone she always applied to prospective employees.

"It is so, Gentlefem." I treated her statement as a question and gave answer.

"At least you're young." She continued to stare at me. "The data said you are well grounded in teaching. You're from the crèche—" There was a note of curiosity now, as if my background gave her a measure of interest. "You understand this employment is only temporary. We have to go to this awful frontier world for a year, maybe two, because my husband is stationed there. Are you a good spacer?"

As to that, how could I tell, never having lifted on any ship. But I do not think that she was really interested in me, for she swept on.

"I am not, not in the least. I go into voyage sleep at once, just as soon as we take off. But Bartare and Oomark cannot do that for the entire trip—they are too

young. You'll have to take care of them during wake periods. I don't know—you're young—" What appeared to have faintly pleased her earlier now seemed to provide a question. "Bartare is quite difficult, very difficult. She has to have guidance. Her learning level is near eight and will increase, they tell us. You must provide mental stimulation that will induce that increase. But then, you're crèche-trained, so you ought to know all about that. And I haven't time or strength to interview a lot more dreary females—or unsuitable ones. You'll have to do."

That she considered *her* choice the final settlement of the matter was plain. And though I had read into her outpouring some hints of a demanding and exasperating future, I knew that Lazk Volk had been right. This was probably the only door that would open for me, and in this way I could have a different future.

She hardly listened to my assent. Instead, she issued a series of instructions as to where I must meet them. And I learned then that I could have only two days before leaving. This I did not like, but before I could protest, she gave a last order.

"The servo will show you to the children's room. You should meet them, and they must see you. That way, and remember—at the eleventh hour on Seven Night Day."

I did not get a chance to finish the farewell-of-ceremony before the servo ushered me out of the room and into a hallway. There it paused before another door and sent in an announce-call, though it did not wait for permission to enter. It would seem that Gentlefem Zobak treated her children with no more ceremony than she did her employees. I was sent to view and be viewed, and that was that.

It was true that I had taught children at the crèche. But the situation there had always been one of restraint and discipline. Crèche children were most carefully screened. Those with problems of personality or temperament were early given professional treatment elsewhere. The children I had taught had been good

and willing scholars, already set in the patterns of applied study. I was used to bright children who wanted to use their brains to a purpose. So my employer's comments about urging her daughter to best efforts made sense and were familiar to me. But some instinct warned me, even as I entered the room, that this was not going to be like my almost casual schoolroom supervision in the crèche.

The room was as luxurious as the one their mother occupied, but it was purely a sitting room. Strewn over a table under a lamp was a muddle of odds and ends such as had littered their mother's bed. But one item seemed of such interest now that neither child looked up.

Bartare was small, fine-boned, and delicate-looking, like her mother. But she had no languor. Instead, there was such a tension of concentration about her small, thin body as reminded me disturbingly of that I had seen Lazk Volk display on occasion. Her hair was twisted back from her face, which came to a point with a small, sharp chin, with silver cords that gleamed the more because the hair they confined was dead black. She had very well-marked brows, which met over her nose, so they formed a solid bar across her face. And her eyelashes were unusually thick about eyes, almost as deeply sable as her hair. In contrast, her skin was pale, having no trace of color in the cheeks and only a faint tinting of lips.

Her dress was dark green, an odd color for a child, yet one I would always thereafter associate with Bartare. With a strip of material of the same color, she was now wrapping one of the small carven images the country folk set up in their kitchens for protection against the powers of darkness, only this one, crude in its beginning, had several refinements. Metallic wires had been twisted around the head to form a crown—for one.

Watching his sister robe the image was Oomark. Though he was the younger in years, he was perhaps a finger's breadth the taller, big-framed and solid-look-

ing. His face had still a babyish roundness, and now it wore an odd expression, almost as if he were both fascinated and alarmed by what his sister was doing, too unusual a look to accompany the dressing of a doll.

He glanced up at me. Then he leaned over and touched his sister on the arm, almost diffidently, suggesting he was in awe of her and yet knew he must attract her attention.

"Look, Bartare—" He pointed one finger at me.

Bartare raised her head. Her stare was deep, measuring, and somehow very disturbing. I felt almost as shaken as if I had encountered, behind the outer shell of a small girl-child, something old, authoritative, and faintly malicious. But that was gone in a flash. Bartare laid down her doll with the care of one putting aside an important piece of handiwork and came away from the table to sketch one of those curtsies used by children of her class as a polite greeting.

"I'm Bartare, and this is Oomark." Her voice was clear and pleasant. It was only when she shot a sudden glance at me from beneath that eyebrow bar that I was a little chilled.

"I'm Kilda c' Rhyn," I answered. "Your mother asked me—"

"To see us and let us see you. I know." She nodded. "That means you're the one going to go to Dylan with us. I think—" She hesitated a moment and then used an expression that was rather odd. "I think we may suit." But was there or was there not a stress on the word "may" that hinted at reservations and could be a warning?

I cannot remember now much of what we spoke about at that first meeting. After his recognition of my being in the room, Oomark never spoke at all. However, his sister displayed not only excellent manners but also the fact that she was a child of superior intelligence and poise. She—well, I could have said nothing but good of her. Yet I had reservations, an uneasiness all the time we were together, as if we were both acting parts.

Once I saw a tape from Lazk Volk's files portraying a theatrical production on another world. The actors and actresses carried elaborate ceremonial masks mounted on sticks. Each had several of these, fastened by fine chains to their girdles. In time for their speeches, they chose one or another of these masks and held them before, but not directly against their faces, as they recited their lines. This came to my mind now, for it seemed to me that both Bartare and I were holding masks and that what was behind our masks and our stilted, polite conversation was very different.

Yet I was not so disturbed that I would refuse to take the position. In fact, once I had subdued that initial sense of unease, I was intrigued by Bartare, and I thought that I might find the next year or so interesting for both of us. I also judged that Oomark was too much in his sister's shadow, and he might well benefit by special attention.

In any event, I returned to the crèche well enough pleased with the bargain Lazk Volk had aided me to, prepared to cut ties with my old life and lift off-world to a new.

2

I was not long in saying good-bys at the crèche. Save for Lazk Volk, my close ties there now were few. By his influence I had stayed a year longer than others of my age group, being, as I have said, perilously near to the time when I would have been forced to leave whether or no. My leaving fees were paid to me, half in clothing suitable for my future on Dylan, the rest in a small number of credits that I clung to, knowing them to be my barrier against misfortune.

My last hours I spent with Lazk Volk, accepting from him the recorder he was empowered to give me under a reportship. I was not a badge-wearing representative. The authorities would not agree to that. But whatever I returned to Volk's storehouse that was countersigned by him as useful would add to my rating and, perhaps, might lead to more employment.

Yet he warned me not to squander the supplies he was giving me on anything but the most important. And I realized that I must make a little cover much. The baggage of a space traveler was very strictly limited, and I could expect no further supply of tapes should I misuse those I carried with me—at least not unless I had returned one with such useful notage on it as to warrant sending me another.

He asked me what I thought of my charges, and I hedged somewhat. That Bartare was a promising student, I was almost sure. Oomark would be less troublesome. But "troublesome" was the term I applied to

his sister. I know that Lazk Volk noted my reserve, though he did not comment.

I did not join the Zobak family until we met in the entry place for the ship. The Gentlefem was wrapped in the thick folds of a journey cape, but Bartare had pushed back the hood of her outer garment to stare up at the starship as if that presented some problem. Oomark turned excitedly from side to side, his interest all for the coming and going of the crewmen.

As I came up, Gentlefem Guska turned to me, though I could not see her face under her veil. Her voice was even more fretful than I had remembered it.

"You are late. We are about to go on board—"

"I am sorry," I answered. I had schooled myself, having taken her measure at our first meeting, to supply no excuses or explanations. She was of those, I decided, who accepted only one answer—that being their own. And to combat such was like trying to erect a firm tower out of dry sand. Better not to attempt it in the first place.

"I expect promptness," she was beginning when a load cage swung down a few paces from us and the ship's steward, standing within it to direct traffic, beckoned us forward.

"I hate this whirling about!" She clasped my arm so tightly that I supported her into the cage, the children moving with us. And she kept that painful grip as we were swung up, to slide into the hatch. I must admit that that swaying trip gave me little pleasure either.

Once inside, they ticked us off on their entry records, and Guska went away, still leaning heavily, but now on a stewardess, to be put into deep voyage sleep. The children and I were escorted to a small transport cabin and only part suspension.

I earned whatever funds Gentlefem Zobak was depositing to my account, and I earned them well during that voyage, for in the wake periods both children were my sole responsibility. I tried to establish a good relationship with them, and I thought that with Oomark I succeeded. He was plainly not as brilliant as his sister

and far more biddable. Bartare did not disobey me. In fact, she was politely cooperative, all that one might ask for in a child. It was only that the impression was now firmly rooted in my mind that she moved behind a mask and played a part, so that I waited continually for some revelation of what lay behind her words and actions. This feeling fretted me, so that I had to subdue inner impatience and irritation.

I went into the final suspension period before breakthrough and the landing on Dylan with the problem of Bartare remaining as baffling as ever. But now I had accepted it as a challenge, though I knew that I must go very slowly and not try to push the girl into any disclosure.

Though my knowledge of other planets through Lazk Volk's library was extensive, probably beyond that of most general travelers, Dylan was the first new world I had ever visited myself. And I was excited as we were swung down to the landing strip.

The familiar skies of Chalox had carried a green tinge, so that one believed that was the only natural color for any sky to be. But here the arch over us was blue, cut by masses of white clouds. Together with the children, I had pored over the information tapes supplied by the ship's library.

Dylan had been located some one hundred years earlier, oddly enough, because of a distress call set on automatic, though the ship that had sent it had never been found. It was Arth type. And there were some very unexplainable remains that suggested it might once have either had native inhabitants or been a colony of one of the Forerunner races. In fact, it was to gather information about one of these that Guska Zobak's husband had been sent here. He was not an archaeologist but a government man empowered to declare the diggings protected if experts thought it necessary.

There were two cities on Dylan. Tamlin was the port where we disembarked; the other was Toward, on the other side of the planet providing an alternate landing

site. Neither was large. Dylan was mainly an agricultural world. The western continent was one of open plains. And since the native wildlife was very sparse, these plains provided grazing for imported herds and flocks. The eastern continent, of which Tamlin was the center, was planted heavily with vor vines and husard fruit—both of which were luxury items off-world.

But such planting was spotty since both products required special types of soil and drainage, so that the settlements had stretches of wilderness between them. Such distances meant nothing, though, with all plantations and villages linked by air flitter travel.

The buildings of Tamlin did not resemble those of the long-settled worlds. They were all very like, having been constructed to plans worked out off-world, their blocks placed by robo workers. Any difference between them came from the planting about their walls. Here were not only native growths pleasing to the eye, but also exotic aliens imported and flourishing.

As we disembarked from the landing stage, a number of people moved forward to greet the new arrivals. But the man who came to Gentlefem Guska certainly bore no resemblance to the tridee the children had of their father. He was a much older man, wearing the uniform of a port official.

"Where is Konroy?" Guska demanded of him. "Surely his duty does not demand that he not be here to greet us!"

"My dear Guska!" The officer caught both her hands in his. "You know Konroy would be here if he could. It is that—"

"He is dead!" Bartare's words might have been a war alert the way they froze us all for a second that seemed to stretch far longer than that.

She took a step forward and stood looking up at the officer.

"That is the truth," she continued. "Why not say that he is dead?"

I saw one kind of astonishment replace another in

his expression, and I knew that Bartare *was* speaking the truth.

"But how—" he began with a bewildered protest in his voice.

"Dead!" Guska gave a shriek that was echoed by a lesser cry from Oomark. She sagged forward into the arms of the officer, and I moved, one hand going to Oomark, who turned and threw his arms about me, burrowing his face into my traveling cloak. But Bartare shrugged off my touch on her shoulder and stood quietly, no expression at all now on her small pale face.

There was a flurry about us. Guska, unconscious, was taken in the officer's arms to a waiting ground car, while we were ushered by two young spaceport police into another. Oomark continued to hold on to me with a desperate grip, but Bartare was as aloof as if she were only a spectator and a faintly contemptuous one. I felt alienated from her at that moment, as baffled as if I were confronting an unknown life-form that must be handled with supreme caution.

We were given quarters in one of the government rest houses, and I persuaded Oomark to loose me long enough to try to find someone to tell me what had happened. But when I returned to the children, Oomark was fronting his sister, his tear-streaked face twisted with anger.

"You—you knew about it! You don't care!" He accused her shrilly.

I halted where I was, just outside the door. Perhaps he would get an answer she would not give in my presence.

"She told me. His time was finished. And—he is not necessary to us—not any more."

"She's bad!" Oomark's red face was thrust close to his sister's pale one. "You listen to her tell you bad things! Bad—bad—"

For the first time, then, I saw Bartare's composure break. She slapped her brother hard enough to rock his head, leaving a hand print on his cheek.

"Be quiet!" Her voice was not controlled and even

now. "You don't know what you are saying. You can make things worse than even you think just by saying things like that. Be quiet, you fool!"

She turned away from him, and he stood where he was, cowed and shaking, big tears streaking down his face, making no move to wipe them away. When I went in, he came to me in a rush, again burying his face against me, demanding comfort by action rather than words. But Bartare stood at a window, her back to us. And there was something about her stance that gave me the queer feeling she was listening intently, but not to any sound audible to me.

I thought it best to let her be by herself for a time. That scrap of conversation I had overheard gnawed within my mind. Who was the She to whom they had both referred? To my very certain knowledge, the children had been with me continually on board the ship and during the very short time on landing before the officer had come to us. I had not given such news to Bartare, and most certainly her mother had not. Therefore, how had she learned it—and from whom?

And the phrasing of that comment about her father, "His time was finished. And he is not necessary to us any more."

I longed to be able to discuss what I had heard with someone, to ask advice. I had thought myself so well armed and self-sufficient as a result of the crèche training. Yet here I was suddenly as helpless as an infant entering the first class, the more so because there was no instructor for me to turn to with questions.

We were not left alone long, for the same official who had taken Guska away came to see us. He brought with him his wife, a pleasant-faced woman, who swooped upon the children while he drew me to one side with information.

I learned that Konroy Zobak had been killed in an accident when his flitter had been caught in a freak storm a day earlier. There could not be an immediate return to Chalox for his family, though that was what Guska had demanded upon regaining consciousness,

for the liner that had brought us was outward bound on a system-wide swing that would not bring them back to our home world for several years. As a result, we must remain on Dylan until other transportation might be arranged—and when that might occur, my informant, Commandant Piscov, had no way of telling.

He offered us quarters in his own home, but told me that Guska had insisted upon going to the one prepared by her husband. He did not like the situation, but had to agree to it. He wished me to keep in touch and call on him for any needful services.

I could not understand why Guska wanted to be alone since she was the type of person I would have believed would lean both physically and emotionally on the nearest support in any time of trouble. But the commandant said he was sending a nurse to be with her for a time. And I was relieved to know that I need not be responsible for her as well as the children.

After he had told me this, the commandant turned such a measuring look on me that I felt uncomfortable, even though I knew I had done nothing to merit such regard.

"Did you tell the little girl about her father's death?" he demanded.

"How could I? I did not know it myself. Did you send a message to the ship before landing?"

He shook his head, his frown deeper. "No, it is true—how could you have known? The matter was only reported to me this morning after the flitter was found. Only a few knew it. But how did *she* know? Is she esper?"

His suggestion was logical, though I had never known so young an esper to be able to hide such power.

"I was not told so, nor does it appear on her chart."

"There are cases of sudden breakthrough," he said thoughtfully. "Shocks have activated dormant gifts. I shall speak to the parapsychologist. He will get in touch with you."

I nodded with relief. What better aide could I have than that of a well-qualified parapsychologist? And, of

course, the commandant had hit upon the reason for the strange knowledge, perhaps even the unease Bartare had awakened in me. If she was a latent esper, then one might in periods of heightened tension sense this, just as her power could be released by a shock.

Only, as I followed the children and the commandant's wife out to the ground car, I began to perceive holes in that theory. First, Bartare had not been on this world when her father had died, nor had she ever given any indication of mind-linkage that would end in shock at his death. And what of the She both children had discussed? Their conversation had given me the firm impression that it was a third person to whom they referred, one whom Bartare accepted as a friend and Oomark met with a mixture of fear and dread. Who was She? All I could swear to was that she had not been one of our visible company that morning.

Visible company? Why had my thoughts supplied that particular word—as if we could have invisible company among us! I gave myself a kind of mental shake. As Lazk Volk had often commented, I was too prone to allow my imagination play. One must hold to the evidence. Only in this case the evidence went beyond sense.

The house Konroy Zobak had prepared for his family lay on the outskirts of town. It was set in a district mostly used by administrative officers and visitors of rank. Still, the houses were very much of a pattern, one story, built around an open inner court into which all the rooms opened.

That court was centered by a pool and had, in addition, well-kept beds of flowers or decorative shrubs, each guarded by a low wall. The pavement was patterned in colored stones and blocks of crystal formation. I suddenly noted, as we walked behind a servo balancing our luggage on its flat top, that Bartare was crossing that pattern in an odd skip-hop, managing each time to touch her foot, as it came to the ground, on a crystal piece. She stared down at the pattern with such

absorption that one could believe she was engaged in an operation on which much depended.

Then she jerked up her head and looked about quickly as if to assure herself that she had not been seen. Our eyes met and held for less than an instant. She turned her head and walked normally, paying no attention to what lay under her feet. But I knew she had seen me watching. Again I felt uneasy, wanting very much to discuss this with someone who knew more than I.

The three rooms made ready for the children and me were at the rear of the courtyard. Those intended for Guska, when she would arrive with the nurse, lay to the right. The four at the left as we entered comprised the library and office of Konroy Zobak, a dining room with hall servos for cooking, and a storeroom.

Each bedroom had a small fresher opening off it. To someone used to inner-planet luxury, it might seem a bare and rather starkly planned house, but I thought it pleasant. And the open courtyard provided an attractive place to sit. I thought it far better than the crowded quarters I had been used to all my life.

I had enough soon to keep me busy, settling the children in their new quarters and then lending assistance to the nurse who accompanied Guska. They had given her a sedative so that she moved in a dreamy haze and obeyed the nurse's suggestions languidly. But the nurse confided to me that she had become so distraught when they had suggested she stay with the commandant's family that the doctor thought it better to allow her her own way and to hope that the quiet of this house would help her.

She passed into a deep sleep once we got her in bed. And since nothing then seemed to disturb her, the nurse and I moved about unpacking and putting her things in place.

We dialed the servo for a meal and found the food good. Oomark ate heartily, and I noticed that today Bartare, who was inclined to pick at her food and dawdle over her plate, showed an appetite almost as good

as his. It had been mid-afternoon when we had landed. Now it was growing dark, and I suggested bed for the children.

Again I was agreeably surprised when neither of them rebelled but seemed willing. And I was even more astonished when, as I tucked Oomark in, he caught my hand and held it tightly, looking up into my face as if he needed reassurance.

"You won't go? You will be here?"

"In this room, Oomark? Do you want me to stay with you until you go to sleep?"

Neither child had before shown any such feeling. And I was heartened to think that Oomark had so turned to me, though I regretted the reason for it.

For a moment I thought that he would accept my offer. But then he released my hand and shook his head. "Just here—in the house." He raised himself on one elbow. "Bartare says—She doesn't like you."

"Bartare doesn't like me?" I countered, though I had a suspicion that the She of his speech was not his sister.

"Bartare won't like you if She doesn't," he said. "Bartare—"

"You want me, brother?"

Bartare stood in the doorway. She had her nightrobe pulled about her. And her hair, freed from its daytime cords, was loose on her shoulders.

"No." He turned his head away sharply as if the last thing he wanted was to see his sister. "I'm sleepy. Go away! I want to sleep."

I knew better than to try to press him then, so I pulled the covers smooth and wished him good night. As I went to the door, his sister retreated before me. But I found her waiting outside.

"Oomark's just a little boy, you know," she said, as if a long range of years separated her from her brother.

"A frightened little boy."

"*He* has nothing to be afraid of here." A simple sentence, but the intonation of the word "he," the look she sent in my direction from under her bar of eyebrows, was revealing. She was delivering a warning. And

there was such vast effrontery in it that I was astounded because in that moment, if only for a second or two, our roles appeared reversed. I was subject to her control, not she to my responsibility.

I think she was quick to sense she had made a mistake, gone a little too far, for the other something that she wrapped around her as a cloak vanished, and she was a little girl again.

"It is strange—" She glanced away from me, around the courtyard, as if she were trying to suggest that she, too, was a little fearful of this alien world. Only her change of mood was too late and too false—though I kept myself under control and did not reveal any knowledge of her mistake.

"But a pleasant planet from what we have seen of it."

"It killed my father, you know."

"An accident." I could not understand her, and perhaps I was no match for her either.

"Yes, an accident," she agreed. And again, though perhaps I was overly suspicious, I read a warning in her words.

"Do you want to go to bed now? I thought you said you were tired—"

"I am," she agreed, and there was almost a note of relief in her voice, as if she were thankful for my suggestion.

And she was all little girl again as I settled her in bed as I had Oomark.

"You are going to bed now, too?" she asked as I was about to leave her.

"In a little while—"

"But you are not going far away?"

"I'll be in the courtyard." But I did not believe that she needed any reassurance of mine. It was rather a desire to know where I would be to satisfy some purpose of her own.

I sat down where I could see the doors to both of the children's chambers. Before I had so settled, I set the servo-alarm at the courtyard gate. Nothing could come

in or out now without alerting a guard robo and sounding an alarm. Why I had taken that step I did not really know, but I felt safer when it was done.

In the light of the very large and yellow moon that served Dylan by night, those crystal patches in the pavement fluoresced and glowed, almost as if each had a small lamp beneath the block. I could see the night light burning in Guska's room and knew that the nurse planned to sit up with her for part of the night.

But though I tried to think coherently and purposefully of all that had happened since we had landed, I found myself growing more and more drowsy, until I stumbled out of my chair toward my own bedroom.

I had come into the room with my head slightly turned, so that I saw a flicker of movement from the corners of my eyes. But when, aroused a little, I jerked around to face that straightly, I saw nothing there save a mirror. And I imagined it had been my own reflection that had momentarily startled me.

That alarm had shaken me more awake, and I set about preparing for bed more briskly. It was not until I sat down before the mirror, combing my hair, that it happened.

My brown skin, the hair above it, my green eyes—they showed very large and more green in this mirror than I had ever seen them. I examined what I saw closely, remembering Lazk Volk's words concerning my looks and wondering if he had spoken the truth, that I had some small claim to a pleasing appearance—a thought that will intrigue any woman.

Then, my reflection vanished, as if a flick of the comb through a tight curl had winked it out of existence. And I saw—

The bare bones of it, maybe, were like unto mine, but what leered and postured there was not me. Horror held me dumb and still, though in me grew a need to scream. The smooth brown skin I had seen was sere, wrinkled, freckled with dark patches. The teeth were gone, so my mouth was shrunken into a wrinkled opening, and my chin and nose drew together. My hair was

white and thin, hanging in limp, sparse strands over a seamed and corrugated forehead. The eyes were only dark and empty pits—yet I could see!

I heard a choked cry and saw that horror in the mirror shake and reel, even as I swayed back and forth before it. The comb fell from my hand and clattered on the dressing table. And that slight noise broke the illusion. It was gone, and I stared wild-eyed, with a heart beating so fast and heavily that it frightened me, at what I had always seen in any glass. The vision, nightmare, whatever it was, was gone. But as I sat there limp, shivering with a cold inside me, I knew I had seen it. *It?* What *had* I seen? And why?

3

Badly shaken, I crept into bed and lay there shivering, trying to make some sense of that illusion, for illusion I was sure it must be. Only no possible combination of light and shade in this room could have accounted for the hideous thing on the mirror's surface. And I had certainly not taken dream smoke or any of the hallucinatory drugs. As I drew the covers tighter around my body, feeling that I could never be warm again, I searched my memory for some hint of what must have really happened during those few moments.

There were numerous accounts of odd experiences on many worlds to be found in Volk's library. I had read enough to know well that what seemed "magic," totally unexplainable to one species or race, might be commonplace to another perhaps a quarter of the galaxy away. Even espers could achieve strange results to baffle their own race—

Espers! Had the commandant's guess concerning Bartare been correct, and was my experience some projection of her thoughts concerning me—forcing me to see myself as she wished me to be?

That idea was terrifying enough, but it was less weird than some of the other explanations that I resolutely thrust away. On impulse I got out of bed again and caught up a robe to wind about me. That thick drowsiness into which I had sunk earlier was dispelled. I was as far from the need of sleep now as I would have been at morning rising.

I thrust my feet into loose flap-slippers and went to look out into the courtyard, for the second time catching a flicker of movement. But this time as I faced it squarely, it did not disappear. There was a figure slipping along the inner wall from the shadow of one doorway to the next—a small figure.

My first impulse was to call out. But then I remembered the guard I had set at the outer door, and I wanted very much to see all that I could before I revealed myself. I moved as silently as I could along the same way, trying not to allow my slippers to flap against the pavement.

The one I followed had reached the final inner door, that of the library. And there it or she lingered so long that I wondered if that was the goal. Then, as if reassured that she was not being watched, the figure came out into the bright moonlight.

Bartare! Somehow I was not in the least surprised.

She no longer wore her nightrobe, but had on her favorite green dress, though her hair swung free as I had seen it last. She was carrying something in both hands as if, though the object seemed small and light, it was so precious that she must take good care of it. Holding it out, a little away from her body, she stood intently studying the pattern of the pavement.

Then, as if she had made some important choice, she set that which she carried on one of the crystal pieces, taking some care in that placing, as if she must be very sure of what she did.

Having so centered it to her liking, she withdrew a little, and her small hands moved in a series of gestures that wove for me a disturbing pattern. They must have a meaning, but to me the feeling was that of searching for some important word eluding the conscious mind.

I heard a murmur of sound, too far away, too low-pitched for me to distinguish any words, yet speech it was. And so speaking, perhaps to what she had put in place, perhaps only to the empty air, Bartare began a dance that led her feet from one crystal block to an-

other, while she took great care not to tread on anything else.

Since the pattern was wide and those blocks well scattered, her round brought her slowly to where I stood in the shadow of the door of her father's study. Now I could distinguish separate word sounds, still without meaning. It was plain she chanted, the words strung together in a cadence of a ritual salutation or invocation.

Invocation! I fastened upon that. It could explain much, and while danger lay there for any imaginative child, yet it was normal enough. I could have quoted hundreds of cases where the young, especially girls entering into adolescence, had created for themselves imagined forces and played with the belief in powers unknown to others. If Bartare was esper without realizing the fact, this might well be the fashion in which her slowly expanding power would lead her.

She halted her dance not too far away and turned to face the thing set up in the full moonlight. Once more she gestured, as if she were grasping and pulling to her some emanation. Having so gathered the invisible, she rolled it between her palms as one takes wet clay and balls it to make a sphere. Then she threw what she did not really hold, aiming it at the door of her mother's bedroom.

Again she drew from the object, rolled and threw. This time that toss of nothing was for Oomark's doorway. When she began for the third time to collect invisibility, I had no doubt that it was meant for the room I did not occupy, and so it was.

After she made that last throw, she visibly relaxed. I read into her stance a feeling of security such as had been mine when I closed the courtyard entrance, as if she had now bolted some doors leaving her free to do as she would.

She went back to the object, still careful to step only on the crystal blocks, picked it up, and hugged it tightly

to her. Then, still treading on crystal only, she went to the outer gate of the courtyard.

However much she believed in what she had done, she had not triumphed over the robo protector. The crackles of a force shield flashed warning before her, and the alert of an audible warning brought a small answering cry from her. She stopped, her right arm raised as if again hurling something at that which barred her leaving, but this time with no results. The shield held, the alarm purred, and I judged it time to show myself.

"Bartare!" I stepped out of the shadow.

She whirled, sliding her feet from the crystal block on which she had stood. Her eyes glistened as might those of a cornered and startled animal, just as her lips drew back against her teeth, showing small white tips bared to bite. She might have been expecting some physical attack.

Her move brought her away from the warning zone of the gate protection. Both the alert and the force field stopped. She did not move toward me, but waited for me to join her. Her arms tightened about what she held, as if that, above all, must be protected. And I saw it was the doll-image she had dressed in green.

"Bartare—" I was rather at a loss for words. And I was sure she would answer no questions I might ask now. Perhaps I would be on better terms with her, more able to win her confidence, if I did not push the matter. That this was a secret thing of her own, I did not doubt. "Bartare—it is time for sleeping—"

That sounded feeble as no one knew better than myself.

"Then sleep!" she returned. "They do—" That slight nod indicated the rooms of her mother and Oomark. "Why do you not?" It seemed to me that the fact I stood there was disconcerting for her, marked a failure.

"I don't know. Perhaps because this is my first night on a strange world. Who can say that one does not change a little when stepping on alien soil?" I spoke to her as I would to Lazk Volk.

"All worlds are strange—if you look."

I guessed that she was referring obliquely to what had occurred here, so I nodded.

"That is true, for no one can look through another's eyes and see exactly as she sees. What I call a flower—such as this"—and I reached down to touch a cup-shaped bloom in a nearby bed—"you may also call a flower and yet not see it as I do—" I halted, for the blossom I had touched was going through a frightening transformation.

It had been pale ivory. Now from the point where my fingers had so lightly touched it, a dark, unwholesome stain spread. The flower was withering, decaying, dead and dying, as if my touch polluted and killed.

Bartare laughed.

"I see a dead flower. What do you see, Kilda? Is it the same? Do you see death coming from your fingers?"

This might be hallucination, but how it had been produced I could not tell. It was certainly unnerving. My hold on logic was the hope that it might indeed be so fragile a bloom that any touch would harm it. There were sensitive plants, though I had never seen one so much so as this.

"Do you see death often, Kilda? As in mirrors?" She came closer to me, her glistening eyes on mine, trying to see into me, see the fear that had filled me when I had looked into the mirror. At that moment I could believe—I was *sure* that Bartare not only knew what had happened, but also why and how. And I could not hold back questions.

"Why, Bartare—and how?"

Again she laughed, shrilly, a little cruelly, as sometimes a child may when she is single-hearted and set on gaining her own desires.

"Why? Because you look, Kilda, and you listen, and you want to know too much. Do you want to look in other mirrors, Kilda, and see always what you would not like to? There are other things that can happen—worse than just a reflection."

Deliberately she turned a little from me to gaze out

over the moonlit court. Then she spoke once more, but it was not to me. She addressed those words to the empty air.

"You see?" she demanded. "Kilda is no more than any of the others. There is no need to think twice of her."

She waited as if for an answer. Then she retreated a step or two, and the look of triumph vanished from her face. My own imagination supplied a rebuke that I could not hear but which had chastened the girl's self-esteem. If that was what had happened, she might be ready to vert her disappointment and anger on me, the more so because I was a witness.

But her discomfiture was that of a child. She lost the strange, disturbing maturity that had masked her. Instead, her features screwed up into a familiar pattern of frustrated anger as she shrilled at me, "I hate you! Spy on me again, and I'll make you sorry! I will! I will! You'll see!"

She turned and ran, paying no attention now to the blocks over which she fled, intent only upon reaching the door of her room. And an instant later that clicked firmly shut behind her.

I stood for a long moment looking across the court-yard, then stooped to examine more closely the flower I had touched. The courtyard was certainly empty. And the flower was a black ball of quick decay. Almost I had expected to find it intact. But that much was real, or looked real. I broke the stem of the flower and took it with me. But before I went again to my own room, I looked in upon Oomark.

He was sleeping heavily. Having seen him so, on impulse I visited Guska Zobak's room in turn. In the dim night light, the nurse huddled in an easirest, sleeping, too, while Guska lay inert but breathing in the bed. It was almost as if they had all taken a sedative.

I had a dead flower in my hand, I had a detailed memory of what I had seen in the courtyard, and I had above all now a pressing need to confer with someone. I decided then that if the commandant did not go for-

ward with his suggestion to bring in a parapsychologist, I must instigate such a meeting myself.

With that thought in mind, I went back to bed. I thought that I was too wrought up to sleep, but that was not so, for my last memory was of stretching out and pulling up my covers.

Even now I have no way of explaining what happened in the morning. I awoke with a feeling that I had dreamed significantly—that was all. The memory of the night before and the help I needed had been lost. I had only a teasing half-recall, which bothered me during the day, the necessity to do something, see someone—yet I could not clarify it.

Gentlefem Piscov called on us before the morning was over, and I found hers a soothing presence. It was apparent she liked and understood children. And Oomark and Bartare both acted like ordinary children that day. She took us on a tour of the city. We had landed on the eve of a week of national celebration marking the landing of the colony's First Ship. And soon we were drawn into the festivities of the government circle.

I saw Oomark develop friendships with two boys near his own age, though Bartare, always polite and with manners that impressed adults if not her contemporaries, did not have such a social success.

Little by little, as one collects fragments of a dream to fit them together hazily, I did remember that scene in the courtyard. But oddly enough, it had no power now to alarm me or make me think it serious. I had come upon Bartare playing some highly imaginative game and allowed her actions to overcome my good sense. I would have more control over her in the future if I refused to consider such a performance more than a childish game. So can one be influenced without realizing the fact.

Bartare, showing no more desire for midnight wanderings or talking to the air, made it seem less and less important. Her present slightly antisocial attitude with other children did not alarm me, for she was much

like what I had been myself at her age. And I do not think it right to force children into ways adults deem "normal" but which will irk and alienate the child.

Instead, I did find a common meeting ground with Bartare. She watched me unpack the recorder Lazk Volk had given me and seemed interested. I told her of Volk's galactic library and the fact that I had worked there, saying that now I hoped to be able to add something to it—providing I could find material here unusual enough to be worthy. But I explained that I must be highly selective as I was limited in the amount I could send.

I suppose her interest, as it was meant to do, disarmed me—one of the oldest ploys in the world—so that when she made her suggestion, I was pleased that I had found something through which to reach her and was really intrigued by the value of her comment, for it was her proposal that we visit the ruins her father had been inspecting before his fatal crash.

But that this could be done was dubious. In the first place, the site of the ruin was deep in the wilderness, quite a distance from Tamlin—meaning an overnight stay—and the accommodations there were limited to the staff at work. I explained this to Bartare, and while she seemed disappointed, she then suggested there might be other points of interest nearer to the city.

So well, far too well for any child, did she conceal her own wishes in the matter that I was quite convinced she merely wanted to see me in action as a recording expert. And I drifted along in a fog of complacency.

Guska Zobak also continued in a fog. But this was, or so it seemed at that time, a far more serious one. She was content to lie and drowse. Any attempt to rouse her brought on a return of hysteria. After two such battles, the medico reported complete bafflement. As long as she was left to her half-sleep (and this was no longer drug-induced), she was manageable. To attempt to shake her awake brought her to such a state that he actually feared for her sanity.

He finally admitted that her case was beyond his

solving and that she needed expert off-world treatment. So, the fact that the first ship planeting here that could provide room for us would carry us back to Chalox was accepted. The trouble was that such a ship did not come into port, though more than one freighter or outward-bound transport finned down as the days passed.

Oomark was happy with the boys. And he now went to the port school, where he fitted in well. It seemed to me that he was more at ease than I had ever seen him. He spent more time out of the house than in it, but I thought that very natural, that with masculine company of his own age he was secure and leading a more normal life than he ever had under Bartare's domination. Also a house in which quiet must be maintained for Guska's sake was not for a small and active boy.

Bartare objected so strongly to the port school that I took on her tutoring, knowing that Guska had intended this to be so. She had a quick and vigorous mind, one that was best served not by an imposed code of learning such as formal schooling demanded, but rather by guidance and sharing of discovery.

I could not grow fond of her as a person. There was always that feeling that she tolerated, sometimes impatiently, those about her. But I respected her abilities. And when she showed no more signs of imaginative play or action, I grew far more easy with her.

She did not forget her desire to find something for me to record for Volk's files and returned to the subject often, making many suggestions. At last, perhaps because I was weary and even a little ashamed of my constantly saying "no" to her eagerly advanced ideas, I agreed that we would spend a small portion of my tape on a visit to the Lugraans.

Dylan had been found oddly lacking in larger native life, and one Survey account tentatively suggested it had been deliberately denuded of such life at a remote time. Thus, there were a few things visitors were always escorted to. And one of those was a favorite picnic place for children—the Lugraan Valley.

The Lugraans themselves baffled the scientists who had studied them. In the first place, any attempt to transport one of the creatures from the valley resulted in its death, the body being left without any sign of what caused that death even under the minutest of autopsy examination. So now it was forbidden to approach them closely, though one could watch from rock ledges above their living place.

They had already been taped, of course, and I did not doubt that Volk had such tapes in his collection. But they were the only native things of any note, and I could try my hand at a few lengths of such recording, giving Bartare pleasure and, I did admit to myself, so continuing to hold her interest.

It seemed that luck favored us as Oomark's group of level mates at school were about to visit the Lugraans. And this outing included parents and other members of the family if so desired. Thus, Bartare had an excellent reason for pushing the expedition.

To Oomark, however, this was not pleasant at all. When I spoke of it, he looked, for the first time in days, like his old self. Much of the eager animation vanished from his face, his lower lip pushed forward in a pout, and he scowled at his sister.

"*You* want to go," he said to her rather than to me. And his tone made the words an accusation.

"Of course. Kilda is going to make a recording—"

"It isn't your kind of place!" He was openly hostile. "Don't let her come—" He turned to me. And the strain on his small face was out of all proportion to the situation. He might have been despairingly watching all he had won of friendship and freedom being threatened by a power he could not hope to combat.

I could not stand against that plea. If it meant so much to Oomark, I would not insist. We could go to the Lugraan Valley by ourselves. I said as much, and he showed a flash of relief, which vanished when he glanced at his sister.

My eyes followed his. The shadow I saw in her expression awoke a twinge of the old uneasiness. Some-

how Oomark braced himself, as if with my support he was going to defeat Bartare this time.

"Do you want to go alone, not with us?" Bartare asked. She spaced those words a little, giving them more weight than such a simple question needed.

Oomark flushed and then paled. But he stood his ground.

"Yes—yes—"

Bartare smiled. "Let it be your choice then."

Oomark gasped, turned, and ran out of the courtyard as if he were already late for school and must get there—or away from us—as quickly as possible. Bartare looked to me, still smiling.

"He'll change his mind—you'll see. And you ought to tell Gentlehomo Largrace that we'll go."

"No, not this time. If Oomark wants to be alone with the other boys, it's better to let him."

She shook her head. "He'll want us—you'll see. Just wait and see."

Something about her certainty brought the first crack in the shell of comfortable acceptance that had encased me during the past few days. Memory stirred deep in me. There had been a mirror, and I had seen something in it—

Bartare's smile vanished. She looked concerned as her eyes met mine.

"It is of no matter, none at all," she said hurriedly. "Please, we were going to the Vorright to see the wind pictures—"

And she did what she seldom did, slipped her hand into mine. Bartare had a dislike for being touched that I learned early in our association and that I carefully respected. For her to deliberately seek physical contact was very rare indeed.

We went to the Vorright display hall, and apparently Bartare was absorbed in what we saw. She was playing her little girl role. But my awakening was proceeding, and I was on guard as I had been before that night in the courtyard. Whatever Bartare might be—and I was beginning to wonder if we could discover that—she was

not a normal child. And now, remembering her performance in the courtyard, I found it so disturbing that I longed to be able to pour out all my doubts, surmises, and suspicions to someone such as Lazk Volk, who knew much of the universe and would be open-minded.

The parapsychologist—how or rather *why* had I forgotten my desire to call him? Why had the commandant never moved on his suggestion to do so? Did Bartare have some unknown, heretofore undiscovered esper power to lull thinking in those she wanted to influence?

I reached one answer for myself. But I did not know how she could do it. And until I was able to find out, it would be far better to play her own game of masks, to be the uncaring companion she wanted.

Nor did I doubt now that if she wanted badly to go to the Lugraan Valley, Oomark could not stand against her. But I very much sympathized with his desire to keep as far from his sister as he could. Perhaps, until the circumstances here on Dylan had made it possible, he had never had freedom from her control.

Once freed from whatever restraint had been placed upon me, my own imagination went to work. I had to exercise control over it, tell myself firmly that I would remain alert but that I must not believe Bartare could do much—not until I had concrete proof.

The proof came in such a way as to arouse all my foreboding, to alert all my personal warning signals.

We had returned from town, discussing what we had seen. But Oomark had reached the house before us. His usually round small boy's face appeared gaunt, just as his skin, lightly tanned by Dylan's sun, had now a sickly pallor.

I hurried to where he leaned against the wall, both of his hands pressed to his middle, beads of perspiration distinct on his forehead and upper lip. His mouth worked as if to control nausea.

Before I could reach him, he stood away from the support of the wall to face his sister.

"Take it back—take back what She did to Griffy!" His voice held the shrill of approaching hysteria, that

same wild note I had heard in his mother's the two times the medico had tried to rouse her.

"I haven't done anything," Bartare returned.

"You don't have to—She did! You make her stop! Griffy—Griffy's good. He's—" Oomark's eyelids squeezed together, and tears came from between them. "All right, all right! You can come—you can go—anywhere you please. I'm—I'm going to be sick!"

He moaned then, and I caught him up, carrying him as fast as I could to the fresher. Nor did it matter at that moment what Bartare might say or do in answer to his outburst.

4

I washed Oomark's sweating face. He had been thoroughly and miserably ill. Now he sat on the edge of his bed, hunched together, staring down at the floor. He allowed me to tend him, and when I would have gone to return the washcloth to the fresher, he caught at my overtunic. So I sat down beside him, put my arm around those small shoulders, and drew him close. He turned his face against me.

"Can you tell me about it?" I asked. It was plain he had had a shock. And if Bartare was responsible for this—At that moment I was willing to be primitive enough to apply punishment with my own hands.

"She said I'd be sorry—" His words were muffled. "And I am. But not Griffy! They didn't have to do that to Griffy!" Again that hysterical note.

I was at a loss. Which would be better—to urge him to tell me just what had happened or to try to get him to forget it and ask the nurse for some sedation?

He decided for me, moving about so that he showed again his tear-streaked, pale face.

"Griffy—he lives with Randulf. He's a poohka—a real, live poohka, not just a stuffed one like I had when I was little. He goes everywhere with Randulf, even to school. Only he wouldn't ever come here 'cause he knew, you see—he knew!"

"Knew what?" A poohka was an alien life-form from off-world and created with its small, furry body the instant desire to cuddle—a perfect pet. But since they

were fabulously expensive, I was surprised that any child this far from their planet of origin would have a poohka.

"He knew—" Oomark was emphatic. "He knew about her."

"Your sister?"

The boy shook his head. "Oh, maybe he knew about Bartare—'cause She and Bartare—they are always together. But She's the bad one! And She made Griffy be hurt! I know she did. He was hurt bad. And maybe even the medico can't help him. She wanted to make me sorry 'cause I didn't want to have Bartare go with us. But She didn't have to hurt Griffy—he never did anybody any harm, and he's the nicest fur person I ever, ever knew!" His small body began to shake, and I was frightened at the severity of this upset. I freed one arm and pressed the call for the servo. When that machine came trundling in, I taped a message for the nurse.

Together we got him soothed and to bed. Then I went in search of Bartare. I found her in the library, a tape reader going, listening with dutiful concentration to a history lesson. But I pushed the cutoff button and faced her.

"Oomark believes you have in some manner harmed his friend's poohka." I had come with the firm intention of asking searching questions, of demanding illuminating answers.

She looked at me blankly, as if completely surprised or startled. "How could I, Kilda? I have never even seen any poohka. And I have been with you all day."

"Oomark keeps talking about a She who is responsible through you—" I persisted, determined that this time I would not allow her to put me off.

"Oomark's just a baby," she answered. "I used to scare him when he was bad. I told him that a Green Lady was coming to get him and that she would do all I told her to. Now he thinks there really is a Green Lady and—"

"And you still play upon his fears to get your way?"

"Well—sometimes—"

Plausible enough given coincidences, which do happen. If I had not seen and overheard enough to make me suspicious, I might have believed her. What to do now—should I accept her explanation and wait for her to irretrievably betray herself? Or should I at once call the parapsychologist and arrange an interview?

"I wouldn't, you know." She held my eyes with a straight stare as she said that. There was a faint shadow of an unpleasant smile about her lips.

"But you see, Bartare, I am not a little boy you have managed to frighten by your tales. I do not believe in your Green Lady, nor shall Oomark any longer. It is apparent you both need more help than I can give you."

Her smile was broader. "Try it and see!" There was an exultation in that, far from any child's emotion. "Just try and see!"

To my horror, I found she was right. Try as I might, I could not reach the com when I went to call Commandant Piscov and ask for the help I was sure we needed. And, truly frightned by this check, I returned to Bartare, who was again listening to the tape, very much the schoolgirl absorbed in her lesson.

"You see"—she glanced up as I came in—"I told you that She won't let you do that."

I sat down on the chair facing this enigmatic charge of mine. "Suppose you tell me who She really is—your mother?" I made as wild a guess as possible, hoping to surprise some answer. The results were past my hopes.

Bartare was out of her seat, leaning over me, her whole face convulsed with some emotion I could not read.

"How did you—" Then that emotion was gone. She turned her head a trifle. Her attitude was so much that of one listening that I also looked in that direction. There was nothing—no one—there.

"Who is She?" I asked again.

Then she gave a pert answer. "That's for me to know, and it would be better for you not to find out, Kilda. Really it would. I like you—a little. But if you make

trouble, then you'll find trouble. Don't worry about Oomark. And you can tell him Griffy's going to be all right—as long as he does what he's supposed to. You'll be the same, for the same reason. We are going to the valley. It is important."

With that she left me sitting there.

My first reaction was a flare of anger. Luckily my crèche training helped me to face facts. I was badly hit in both my self-confidence and my self-esteem. It would appear that Bartare had some power, undoubtedly esper, which could keep me from summoning aid. I had very little left to me in the way of a weapon. And when I faced that bald fact, I was almost as frightened as I had been by that vision in the mirror. Now I did not, in the least, doubt that that had been some product of Bartare's arranging also, that she had done it either as a warning or a threat. Was Guska Zobak aware of what she had produced in a daughter?

And was her present withdrawal based on a desire not to face the fact of Bartare without the support of her husband? Or was it also engineered by Bartare? She apparently was able to keep me from summoning help to deal with her.

My knowledge of espers and esper powers was only that of the average well-read layman, garnered from Volk's tapes. And it is difficult for one without such abilities to judge, or even believe, in the extent of what one so endowed can accomplish.

Esper or not, my nature rebelled against becoming, as Oomark had, one Bartare could dominate. Perhaps she did not believe, in her child's confidence, that forewarned is forearmed, and there were measures that could be taken to forestall take-over—I was startled to find my thoughts had ranged so far. To be controlled by a child only little more than half my age! It was impossible—or was it? That chill question hung over me as a constant mind-shadow.

I did not have the knowledge I needed, only scraps and bits of information. And from those bits I must build an inner armor and strengthen it until I could

stand up to Bartare. How I longed for only an hour's access to Volk's library.

Outward compliance was my best cover for the present. I agreed to that bitter fact reluctantly. There were exercises against hallucination, and I would begin those. In the meantime—what better material could I supply to Volk than my own entanglement in this weird web? I had come a long distance in search of some wonder to add to his store of knowledge, and I had found what I sought—not on Dylan, but within myself.

I went back to my room and brought out Volk's recorder. Yes, there was a thought transcriber attachment. I had used one but only briefly, and I was not sure I had the training to completely record a report thus. But I believed now it was the only sure method, for I had no idea how far Bartare's esper powers penetrated or whether she could overhear an audible recording.

With the lock beam set on my door, I lay down on my bed and began to compose within my mind the clearest record I could of all that had happened to me since I had met Guska Zobak and her children. Twice I outlined events in my thoughts, edited and strove to make them as free as possible of my own reactions and guesses. It might be possible to add those at the end, but what I had to deliver first were facts, not my interpretation of them—though, as with any report, no matter how hard the compiler strives to make it impersonal, there would continue to exist traces of the maker.

Having done my best to assemble a coherent and meaningful sequence, I strapped on the forehead disk and began, giving my twice-edited account. I used the high speed so that much could be embodied on the smallest possible portion of the tape. And I found the whole process much more exhausting than any two regularly dictated accounts.

Then I spun the tape back so the spool looked unused. That I was taking the precautions of one being

spied upon, I realized. But I would not make the mistake of underestimating Bartare.

Oomark spent the rest of the day in bed. Also, it was apparent that just as he had turned to me earlier for help, so now he shrank away. As far as I knew, Bartare had not visited him. But I could be sure of nothing now, and it was plain that he feared either me or what he had told me in his confusion. He did receive a call via visa-com from Griffy's owner and was reassured that the poohka seemed to be responding to treatment.

The next morning he went off eagerly when the school transport picked him up, though I noted he glanced several times with apprehension at his sister's door, she having made no appearance. Within the hour she did appear, wearing sturdy outdoor clothing, ready for the valley expedition.

I had changed into breeches, land boots, and a warm innerlined tunic—for which foresight I was to be very glad. And I packed a shoulder bag with trail rations, making sure that though we might go to the valley with the group escorting Oomark's class, we would not intrude upon their picnic lunch. The farther I was able to isolate Bartare at present, the better. To my relief she appeared to accept the idea of staying to ourselves quite as if that was the best thing to do, though perhaps she was as eager to keep me from contact with those outside our private field of struggle as I was to restrain her.

We reached the flitter park in good time and found ourselves assigned to a craft with two mothers and one aunt. At best, I found casual social contacts difficult because of my own background. And now, with my inner tension, it was an added burden. I seemed to preserve my outer shell so well, though, that they accepted my account of Guska, in answer to their inquiries and other small talk, as if I were acting my part well.

Bartare played the small girl correctly, responding politely to the suggestion of one of the mothers that she meet the other's daughter. She carried, as she in-

sisted upon doing, the recorder, holding to it with purpose.

The trip was longer than I had supposed, for we swung out over the countryside, which was at first divided into sections and fields rich with nearly ripened crops, and then into unsettled land. It was here the fact that Dylan was a sparsely occupied frontier planet hit one squarely.

I had lived all my life on a congested planet where one's only sight of growing things was carefully tended, long-tamed, well-trained gardens. Though the art of making little seem much greater was assiduously practiced by their designers, they were only specks compared to this.

Here was the open as I had seen it only on visatapes. And it hit one with a hard impact. There was something frightening about those long stretches of open country over which we sped. The land here was not as rich as it was nearer Tamlin. There were few trees, and those more like bushes. Under us the level was rising. More and more rocky outcrops appeared, breaking through the soil. We winged over a basin in which steam arose from heated mineral-impregnated springs. It was a strange place, fascinating to look down upon. But I do not think I would have cared to cross it on foot.

Beyond this were jagged ridges. The sun shone bright on crystalline seams. The land must have once been torn by fierce volcanic action. And it was into the heart of this very inhospitable country that we were flying.

Bartare stared down so intently that her face was pressed against the plasta-shield of the window. Her attitude was that of one searching for a landmark that was very necessary to find. But I did not trust my reactions to Bartare. I was so much on the defensive with her that I knew it was very easy for me to read more into any action than might be there.

We landed at a much used parking strip, a plateau leveled to make an excellent flitter perch. There we

were organized into parties by the rangers in charge and escorted to the upper ledges from which one could watch the activities of the Lugraans.

I admit I was taken off guard there—fatally as it proved. Bartare was beside me and Oomark wedged in some distance away, standing between his instructor and his good friend—Griffy's master. He had not so much as looked at us since the party had been counted out and marched up to this stand. I was acutely aware of his avoidance, though perhaps others had not noticed it.

Bartare made no move to join her brother. When we reached the ledge, she handed me the recorder. And because I could not let her guess the service to which I had put it earlier, I went through the motions of training its visa-lens on the scene below us.

The Lugraans showed no interest in us. We might have been totally invisible as far as they were concerned. They were nonhumanoid, though they did walk erect. Their plump bodies contrasted with long and thin upper limbs, short and thick lower ones, and a broad, fleshy tail, which, when they paused to face one another at intervals as if they were carrying on conversations, they thrust stiffly against the ground, forming with their legs a supporting tripod.

In color they were a dull red, a growth of stiff quill-like hair covering all over their bodies. Connected to those bodies, by necks so supple and long as to remind one of reptilian creatures, were heads provided with a heavy brightly yellow beak and with a crest of longer quills on top.

Their forepaws were equipped with handlike appendages, which they used well—judging by the huts made of stones piled together, all so well selected and fitted that they stood sturdily. They also carried on a type of agriculture represented by the cultivation of fungi and the keeping of some monstrous insects that were their equivalent of human food herds.

They were certainly unusual enough to rivet the attention—far too much so, as I realized suddenly when

I looked around and saw that Bartare was missing. Nor was she anywhere in our party. And, in searching for her, I discovered that Oomark, too, was gone.

I edged toward the back, my first faint alarm becoming a certainty that the children must be found and quickly. But when I wanted to speak to the ranger, the instructor, or even to one of the other children, I discovered—to my mounting fear—that the same inhibition that had kept me from calling for aid in handling Bartare back in the city had returned. I could think what I must do, but it was impossible to do it. However, there seemed to be nothing preventing me from leaving the ledge. I went back along the path. None of the others turned their heads to see me go or ask questions, though I tried to will it to happen.

My discovery of Bartare's and Oomark's withdrawal must have come sooner than the girl expected, for I caught sight of them ahead, not on the path returning to the flitter park, but scrambling over the rocks to the right, climbing up the height beyond. Unable because of the inhibition forced on me to attract any attention, it was left to me to follow them.

It was plain I must have both hands free for the climb, and I must choose between the recorder and the bag of supplies. The latter had a strong carrying strap, so I set down the recorder at the turnoff where I must follow the children. I hoped it would be a marker to the way we had gone.

Almost I feared that leaving that small signpost might be forbidden to me also by whatever had clamped down on my ability to alarm or warn. But no, I could leave it so. I could even follow the children without hindrance.

They had already vanished out of sight, and if I were not to lose them somewhere in that mass of broken rock, I must hurry. Though I had kept in good physical condition, thanks to the regime of the crèche, I might never have climbed the first pull, for it was harder than it looked from below, save for my grim need. The slope was treacherous, with sliding stones, which gathered

others in cascades unless one was very careful. And I concentrated entirely on what was immediately before me.

I reached the top of the rise and surveyed the way ahead, to see that I had not utterly lost the children. They were already part way up the next ridge beyond. Oomark was lagging, however, and now and then Bartare paused to wait for him. What she said I could not hear, but it was enough each time to bring him along in a short spurt of renewed effort. I remained where I was until I saw them reach the crown of that other rise, for I had a strong suspicion that were Bartare to see me in such close pursuit, she would take steps to stop me. I could only follow some distance behind until we reached a countryside formed for easier travel.

Once they were over the crest, I made the best time I could down and up. Then I could look down on a long stretch of fairly level territory, save that here the rocky outcrops were numerous and the ground so uneven, with ruts scored in the rock and piles of windswept and worn large boulders, that it was the sort of place where one went slowly and carefully.

Oomark was definitely lagging. Even when Bartare turned and waited with whatever encouragement or lash she had, he trudged at a slow pace. His head hung, and he seemed never to raise his eyes from the ground immediately before him. But he did not stop, and probably Bartare had to be content with so much.

They crossed the open space and were gone. It took me longer to follow. When I reached the far side, I found a sharp and even longer drop. Almost immediately below me Bartare stood with her back to that wall of rock. Her hands rested on her hips, and her head turned rapidly from right to left and back again.

Oomark was still descending the wall. Then he slipped and fell. I gave a gasp when he did not rise again but lay at Bartare's feet. Her impatience was plain to see as she reached down and caught with both hands the material of his tunic where it crossed his shoulders, pulling him up, first to his knees, and then

to his feet. Even though he stood again, she kept her hold on him, as if, were she to let go, he would fall.

The cliff was the wall of a wide open space that might once have held a river, long since dried up. Though there had been small shrubs of a prickly kind standing here and there among the boulders behind, here not the faintest trace of lichen or moss showed.

Most of the large stones were dull gray-brown. But set here and there among them were others whose hue was so different that they were instantly noticeable. They were a dark red—rounded into crude balls. Some stood as high as the children's shoulders. Others might be picked up and held in both hands. And they were widely scattered, as if some giant had idly flung a handful of colorful pebbles down so they fell and rolled as they would.

Having once been sighted, they drew the eye. In some places they lay close together; in others they were widely apart. There was a medium-sized one, about waist tall to Bartare, not too far away.

Dragging Oomark with her, the girl came to that rock and picked up a small piece of stone. With that she struck the red boulder. The answer was a musical note, like the ring of a bell. Bartare listened until the faint echoes died away.

She took hold of Oomark's shoulders once more and gave him a sharp, hard shake. I could see her lips move, though I could not catch the murmur of her voice.

Whatever she said was effective enough. He stooped to pick up a fragment of rock and stationed himself by the boulder she had already struck, while his sister moved on to a larger red stone.

She waved. Oomark struck his boulder, she hitting at the same time the one she had selected. Two notes rang out—but they were markedly different.

Bartare shook her head and beckoned to Oomark. They went on to try a second pair. Nothing daunted by what she seemed to consider ill success, Bartare appeared ready to work their way so across the plain.

When they were far enough away, I descended the cliff in turn.

It was my hope that Bartare was so deeply absorbed in what she was doing that she would not see me, though what I would do when I did catch up, I had not the slightest idea. I was sure only that my responsibility was to remain with the children.

I reached the floor of the valley, drummed along by the continued striking of musical rocks. Sometimes they approached the same note closely. And once Bartare signaled Oomark to try a certain one again. But whatever she sought continued to elude her.

They were well out across the middle section of that valley when I followed, weaving a course among the rocks. I slipped once and put out a hand to steady myself. My bare palm met one of the red balls, and I snatched it away. It was as if my skin and flesh had rested for an instant against a heated grill, perhaps not quite hot enough to burn, but warm enough to startle me.

Testingly I touched one of the ordinary gray boulders and found it no warmer than any sun-heated stone might be, far less than the red one. And I carefully avoided any contact with those again. Then I looked up to see Bartare staring back at me. She raised her right hand and made the motion of one hurling some object, and a spear of light seemed to strike me full in the face and eyes.

5

How long that bedazzlement blinded me, I cannot say, for blinding it was. When sight returned to me again, the children were a long distance away, not at the opposite wall of the valley to which they had been heading, but moving to my left.

Blinking to clear the last of the fog from my sight, I saw that they were still pounding on the ball-boulders. I tried to go after them, but my feet might have been caught in some treacherous engulfing trap. I swayed but could not raise either foot from the ground.

I was afraid. Yet I struggled to go after the two pulling father and farther away. There the rocks stood taller, masking the children's movements, and finally I could not see them at all.

Their disappearance was the key to unlock my bonds. I stumbled and began to walk, though the footing was so bad that I dared not hurry. There were too many small loose stones that rolled and slid under my feet with almost diabolical purpose. I had to creep where I wanted to run, to clutch at rocks to draw myself forward.

Somehow I reached that place of taller outcrops and pulled my way among them until, at last, a rolling stone was too much, and I fell, twisting my ankle sorely. I rubbed it cautiously, fearing a sprain. But when I got to my feet, I discovered I could still stumble along.

As if their purpose had been accomplished, the loose gravel and stones were less, the footing firmer. At

length I stood between two rocks taller than my head, steadying myself with a hand against one, as I gazed into an open space where there were many of the red rocks, much larger than those at the fore of the valley. And there were the children.

Oomark dragged along as if he were exhausted. I could hear a distant murmur I took to be Bartare's voice, urging or exhorting him to greater efforts. Once he hurled away the piece of stone he carried and turned as if to retreat. But Bartare moved so quickly that she disappeared at one place and appeared at another, to bar his way. I saw Oomark's face. His cheeks were red and bore smeared tear tracks. It was plain he obeyed his sister against his will.

She pointed, and he picked up another stone. Something in the slump of his shoulders made me want to run to him and stand before him protectingly. He turned slowly and went to the nearest of those red spheres as if he did not really see the rock but sensed it was there.

Bartare made another lightning move, and I thought she was so engrossed in what she was doing that I could catch up.

There came a low singing note from the ball Bartare struck, and I heard her give a cry of triumph. She did not move on, but waved Oomark on to tap another.

He hit its surface, and she tapped hers again. The notes were close together but did not meet. It was when her brother went to the third ball that she had what she wanted. The two sounds blended to make a single note.

Bartare listened, her head a little to one side, her eyes fixed ahead as if she expected now to see something there. When, after a long pause, nothing happened, she signaled her brother to strike again.

Once more that long, throbbing sound rang through the air, and yet it was through my body, too. I have heard that sound can be vibration, but this sensation of being impaled on a singing note was daunting—so daunting that I knew I must stop what the children

were doing. Knowingly or unknowingly, Bartare was evoking forces beyond the control of the world we knew.

I started forward, my ankle paining me. Oomark had thrown aside his banging stone for the second time and stood with his right arm up, crooked before his face, as if to shelter from a blow. And though I could hear Bartare railing at him, he did not move to obey her.

"Do it!" Bartare's cries reached me. "Do it, Oomark! Do you want me to point the power at *you?* Do it now!"

For a long moment I thought he was going to refuse. But either her threat or the fact she had dominated him so long won. He stooped and felt about for the stone, not looking. Rather he kept his eyes screwed shut as if the last thing he wanted to see was his sister.

"Strike!" she shrieked at him.

Again that double note sounded in a vibration I could feel as a physical assault. Once more whatever she expected in answer did not come. But her absorption was so great that I was sure I could get near enough to seize her. My attack would have to be from behind, or she might apply the very efficient counter she had used before.

It was Oomark who betrayed me. He faced the direction from which I limped, and some change in his expression must have warned Bartare. She swung her head a little, as if to view me from eye corner, and she shouted again:

"Strike!"

As if that order moved me also, I stumbled and fell against another of the red boulders. The supply bag I carried bumped against it, and three notes, not two, sounded together.

If I had felt the vibration as a physical sensation before, that was nothing to what engulfed me now. I have no words to describe what I felt. The best is to say that I swung out as if I were on a rope over some immeasurable abyss, that I so hung for a space beyond the reckoning of any time I knew, and then that all ended in total darkness and nonknowing.

But the period of unconsciousness came to an end, and I opened my eyes, to shut them quickly again as violent nausea racked me. What I had seen bore no point of reference to anything I had known, was so alien to all I did know as to make me doubt my sanity.

Yet though I lay on some smooth, hard surface, I knew also that I could not remain so forever. I must make an effort, no matter how limited. Trying to keep control and master the raging fear inside me, I looked again.

I stared straight up at first, dreading to see what lay to right or left. There was no sun, no moon, only an existing grayness like that of an early summer twilight. Only it did not soothe as might that hour on a world normal to my kind.

Slowly, very slowly, I turned my head to the right. What I saw were not rocks such as had ringed me before. Rather there were geometric figures, some stationary, some moving. Of those that moved, a few drifted, apparently without purpose, slowly. Others jerked along zigzag paths. Their erratic pace, together with their unearthly shapes, brought a return of nausea, so I had to close my eyes and struggle for control.

Though the air about me was gray, these forms were in clashing colors, some of them such as to sear the vision if one gazed at them too long or strove to inspect them closely. Now I turned my head without opening my eyes until I could see what lay left. Then I looked.

There were more of the stationary triangles, oblongs, and a few circles, with only one or two of the floating things, none moving fast. I braced my hands against the surface on which I lay and raised my body a little.

Though that action made my head whirl, I persisted, until the vertigo passed and I dared make another move. I seemed to be lying on a rock surface, cushioned here and there by drifts of shining motes, which, when my fingers dug into them, felt like the grit of very fine sand. Some of the glitter clung to my skin, outlining fingertips and palms when I raised my hands.

I had been aware mainly of what I saw. Now I was

alerted by what I heard. Somewhere a child was crying, not in loud bursts born of rage or disappointment, but with a pitiful whimpering, as one who had been reduced past hope. And in the midst of this weird world I could not be sure of the direction from which that plaint came. But I guessed which one of my charges made it.

"Oomark—" I called, aware that perhaps sounds in this place might also be dangerous. But I must answer that sobbing.

When I called his name the second time, there was a halt in his gasps, and he answered questioningly, as if he could not believe anyone was here, "Kilda? Please, are you Kilda?"

"Yes. Where are you?" I thought he must be to the left. And I hoped I need not face shooting things to find him.

Somehow I got to my feet, and after an instant or two of vertigo, I discovered I was able to shuffle on, my ankle still paining, worse than before.

"Where are you?" I repeated when he did not answer.

Then his voice came, very low and fearful. "I—I don't know."

"Is Bartare with you?" At that moment I hoped not. I was in no shape to face a struggle of wills. I needed time to pull myself together.

"No—"

"Can you tell me where you are? What is it like around you?" I tried to get some bearing on those figures apparently rooted enough to serve as landmarks.

There was a dark crimson cone that had not moved since I first sighted it and, a little beyond, a vivid green triangle, and to the left of those a cylinder of burnt orange. It seemed to me that Oomark's voice came from that direction, and if he saw the same figures, I would have a guide.

"There's a big tree—and a bush with yellow berries—and some rocks—" His words were separated by sniffles.

But what he said was impossible!

"Are—are you sure, Oomark?"

"Yes! Yes! Oh, please, Kilda, come and get me! I don't like this place! I want to go home— Please, Kilda—come!"

Certainly his voice did come from just beyond the crimson cone. But I shuddered to a stop as a blue rod with two hexagonal fins swooped past my head and skimmed the surface of the orange cylinder. When it was gone, I set out doggedly in its wake.

"I see you now, I do, Kilda!" Oomark called. A small figure came running. To my relief it was Oomark in his own proper human body, who caught and held to me tightly. I had half suspected that perhaps both of us might have been altered as much as the land about us. But apparently he, too, saw me as normal.

He clung so to me that I could not move. And I must confess that my return hold on him was a kind of anchorage. At last his sobs died away and his grasp was not so tight. I dared then to say more than the soothing sounds meant to comfort him.

"Oomark—"

He looked up. His face was dirty with dust and tears, but he was attending to what I said.

"Tell me—what is that?" I pointed to the orange cylinder.

"A bush—with berries—so many that the branches are bent way over," he answered promptly.

"And that?" The green triangle was my next choice.

"A tree."

"That?" The dark red cone came now.

"A big rough rock. But, Kilda, why do you want to know all that? You can see it—"

Slipping to my knees, I put my arm about him, to draw him close. I must be careful of what I said now, but I would have to tell him the truth.

"Oomark, now listen closely. I do not see them so at all—"

I paused, hardly knowing how to continue. That very admission might be enough to increase his fear. I knew he had turned to me as a safe anchor, and if I proved unstable, he might be lost.

"Fern seed—" was his amazing comment.

It was so unexpected that I thought he had taken leave of his senses. But he nodded almost briskly, as if my words were proof of something important.

"What is fern seed?" I asked, with cautious gentleness.

"She gave some to Bartare once. If you get it in your eyes or eat it—you see things different. Bartare must have put some on me. What do *you* see, Kilda?" He asked that as if genuinely interested.

"Fern seed," "She," all more bits of a puzzle I felt as if I might never solve.

"Your bush—to me it is an orange cylinder. The tree is a green triangle, and the rock a dark red cone."

His eyes followed my pointing finger. "Then you don't see right here, do you, Kilda?"

"Not as you do, Oomark. Now listen—you say that Bartare is gone, or at least she is not here. Where is she? Did you see her go?"

"I didn't see her, not after I got here," he said. "But I feel her—here!" He loosed his hold on me and raised his right hand to tap the middle of his forehead.

"Do you think you can find her?"

He shivered. "I don't want to, Kilda. She is—she is with her—the Lady."

"And who is the Lady, Oomark?"

He pulled away, turning away his head as if he did not want to meet my eyes.

"She—She is Bartare's friend. I don't like her."

"Where did Bartare meet her?"

"First in a dream, I think. One day Bartare said we must do some things—sing some queer words. She poured layre juice on the ground and crumbled sweetie cakes and tore up some of Mother's pretty feathers and mixed them all together. Then we sat down in the grass, and she told me to close my eyes and count to nine, then open them, and I would see something wonderful. Bartare did—but I never. The Lady, She told Bartare I didn't have the right kind of eyes or something. But She came often after that and taught Bar-

tare things. Then Bartare didn't like me much any more, but she made me help her. But she didn't want to play with Mayra or Janta or any of the girls. She used to pretend to go to see them, but instead she would hide and talk to the Lady. And she said the Lady promised her that if she learned the right things and tried hard, she'd be able to go into the Lady's own world someday. And—" He looked about, his mouth quivered, and his eyes began to fill again. "I guess that's what's happened. Only we had to come along, too. And I don't want to stay here— Kilda, please, let's go home!"

There was nothing I wanted more myself, but how to achieve it I did not have the least idea. I was hesitating over my answer when, with a flash of shrewdness, Oomark guessed what I did not want to say.

"I guess we can't go back, not until Bartare and the Lady let us. But, Kilda, can—can they keep us here forever?"

"No." Perhaps I was too firm, but seeing him so shaken, I dared give no other reply. "But if we find Bartare and the Lady now, maybe we can ask them to let us go."

"I don't want to—I don't like the Lady. I don't like Bartare either, not any more. But I'll go to see them if you think they'll send us home."

There was one other question I must ask. "Oomark, you said Bartare has known the Lady for some time. Did she know her on Chalox?"

"Yes."

"But now we are on another planet a long way from Chalox—" If this wild maze was a part of Dylan—I had no way of being sure of that. "Did the Lady come with you on the ship? And was her home here all the time?" I was feeling my way. Certainly—unless this was a hallucination of such power only a long-trained adept could force it on us—this was no result of esper work. But if I set aside that explanation, what was left save a nightmare founded on nothing known in my time and space?

"She—" He frowned, as if I had presented him with

a problem he had not considered before. "She was there, and She was here. And *this* is her world. She doesn't like our world. She's been trying for a long time to get Bartare to come to her because it is so hard for her to visit Bartare. But I don't know where this world is!" Once more tears were close.

"Never mind. Perhaps it doesn't really matter, Oomark." I gave him a quick hug. "What does matter is finding Bartare and the Lady and telling them that we must go home."

"Oh, yes!" As I got to my feet, he caught hold of my hand and drew me along.

To me, the alien landscape provided no road. However, it seemed that Oomark was confident he knew where we should go. Now and then he pointed to one of the brilliant shapes and said it was a tree, a bush, some natural feature of landscape. But to me there was no change in the alien country. The pain in my ankle increased until the best I could do was hobble. Also, I was both hungry and thirsty, and finally, as I sat down under a dull blue octagon Oomark informed me was a bush, he said wistfully, "I'm awfully hungry, Kilda. Those berries were good, but I didn't eat a lot of them—"

"Berries?" I pulled the supply bag across my knee to open it. "Which ones?"

"The yellow ones back there on the big bush. I landed in the bush when I came here, and they got smeared on my hands. I licked off the juice, and it tasted good, so I ate them. Oh, look here." He scrambled to his feet before I could put out a hand to stop him, to lunge at a triple-peaked blue cone a short distance away. Both of his hands disappeared to the wrist in it, and he pulled out a red circle into which he bit. I could hear a crisp crunch and spoke my warning too late.

"No, Oomark! You can't be sure of any strange fruit—"

But he had swallowed the last bite and was reaching into the cone, withdrawing another fruit. This he offered to me.

"Eat it, Kilda. It's good."

"No! Please throw it away, Oomark. You know space rules. Things growing on other worlds can be deadly dangerous. Please throw it away. See here—I have some choc squares." I dug hastily into my bag and chose what I thought would attract him most, one of the sweets.

He set the circle on the ground and reached out for the square. But he did so with visible reluctance. Oomark loved sweets. It was not like him to be so slow.

As he unwrapped and raised it to his mouth, an odd look of distaste came over his face. He acted as if the smell of the confection of which he had always been so fond was now disgusting. Slowly he rewrapped it and held it out to me.

"It smells funny. Maybe it's spoiled or something. I don't want it, truly, Kilda."

I took it and opened the covering to sniff for myself. There was no odor save the familiar one of choc, so I suspected something in the native food he had eaten had affected him. I decided better not to urge the sweet on him now. When he was hungry enough, he would be willing to eat the rations I carried. Only there were so very few of those. I could not help but suspect that we were indeed on another planet, though the how and why of our transportation I could not explain. And the first rule of any explorer so situated is to use normal supplies and *not* to live off the country.

However, I did not argue now with Oomark as I allayed my own hunger with a concentrate wafer. And I put as tight a strapping as I could about my ankle before we started on.

The passing of time did not register. The twilight had in no way deepened into night or lightened into day. Only my fatigue argued that a good many minutes, or even hours, had passed since Bartare and I had dismounted from the flitter back at the Lugraan Valley.

"Is it far—to where Bartare and the Lady are?" I asked as I stopped to rest again, far too soon after we had left the place where we had eaten.

"I don't know. It's—it's funny here—" Oomark was assuredly trying to explain. "Things can be close sometimes. And then they—they kind of stretch so they are far again. If—if I think about any place, then it seems far off. But if I just walk along and think of Bartare—why, it is closer again. Please, Kilda, I don't know why that's so—really, I don't."

He was plainly distressed, and I did not press him, though his answer did not make sense. And my whole body now ached with the effort I must make to keep moving. On the other hand, since our pause and since he had eaten the fruit—if fruit it had been—Oomark was as brisk as if he were starting out in the morning after good night's rest. When I had to stop a third time, he came back to me.

"Kilda, does your foot hurt a lot?"

"Some," I was forced to admit.

"Let's stay here for a while." He looked about. "I know you can't see it as I do, but this is a nice place. Over here"—he tugged gently to turn me to the left—"there's some tall grass, and it looks soft and nice to sit on. Please, Kilda. I can find Bartare any time. She can't hide from me. But if we get to her and the Lady when you're so tired, Kilda—Bartare and the Lady together—I'm afraid of them! And you should be, too, you really should!"

My aching body supported his argument. My will struggled against a vast cloud of fatigue, and my will lost. I stumbled and fell to my knees in the very spot to which he had guided me. Finding softer ground under me, I could not summon the resolution to rise. With a sigh I surrendered.

6

I rewound my ankle wrapping. My eyes smarted and burned, as they might after exposure to a bright glare. This was a world never meant for our species. Yet Oomark saw it differently, as a normal one. Had Bartare in some manner prepared him?

As I squinted my eyes against that discomfort, I was far from sleep. Here I felt walked danger.

"Oomark, how long has Bartare known the Lady?"

When he did not answer, I opened my eyes wider. His head was turned. All I could see of hunched shoulder and averted head spelled a desire not to reply. Then he said in a harsh whisper, "I don't want to talk about her. She—She knows when I do!"

"Bartare?"

"No—the Lady! It's not good to talk about her—it makes her think of me." He was obviously disturbed. Much as I wanted and needed to learn more, I realized I must not push him too far.

"Have—have you ever been here before, Oomark?" Was that question also infringing on forbidden territory or would he answer it?

"No. Back home—back on Chalox—there was no way to come. Bartare, she found out only a little while ago that there was a way here. She wanted to run off—just me and her—but it was too far to come. So she had to wait until there was a chance to get a ride."

"Was that why you didn't want her to come?"

He nodded. "She was always saying she had to go

someplace. But—I didn't want to come 'cause I don't want to be here! I don't!"

"None of us do." I tried to suggest that it would only be a matter of time before we could return to safe Dylan.

"Bartare does. She wanted to come badly. She won't go away again. You'll see."

The trouble was that I might not see, but I could feel he was right. And I had no idea what I might be able to do once I did confront Bartare. It was up to me to think seriously about a confrontation.

I rubbed my smarting eyes. The burning sensation was a real source of pain.

"Oomark, tell me how it looks, right here, I mean."

"Well, there's a big bush, tall as a tree," he began, and then he paused so long that I opened my eyes. The boy was staring at a triangle of pink-yellow to our right. I averted my sight hurriedly, for its glowing color increased the burning.

"What is it?"

"I—I don't like it, Kilda. Please could we walk—just a little way, maybe. I don't want to stay here any more."

"Of course."

I got to my feet, and we started on. It was not my ankle nor my general fatigue that slowed us so much now, but rather my sight. I kept blinking tears out of my eyes.

We came to an open space where there were few of the rooted colorful shapes. The absense of glaring color aided my sight a little.

Oomark halted. Before us ran a wide zigzag. On its golden surface one could detect a shimmer of movement.

"A stream." Oomark gazed into the shimmer. "It looks deep, Kilda. And the water—it's thick. You can't see any bottom."

"Do we have to cross it?"

"Bartare's over there somewhere." He waved his hand across the zigzag.

"Maybe we can find a place where it narrows or

grows more shallow," I suggested. "Shall we go up or down?"

"She's more that way." He waved his hand to the left.

"Then that way it is."

However, as we shambled along, the zigzag did not vary in width. Oomark continued to report that it was as forbidding as ever. Suddenly he paused again.

"We're going wrong now."

One of the turns had made a sharper than usual angle. If we continued along, we would be heading away. But before I could consider that difficulty, Oomark faced me.

"I don't want to go on, I don't!"

His vehemence was marked. He turned his head from right to left and back again, as if he were backed into a corner and must find a way out.

"Oomark, what is it?"

"I don't—I won't go! You can't make me—you can't!" Hysteria was shrill in his voice. "No—no!"

The boy lunged at me, and I gave a step or two, taken so off guard that I could not reach out a hand in time to catch at him. He brushed by and was gone, running into the grayness that curdled about and swallowed him from sight.

"Oomark! Oomark!" I was afraid I had already lost him. What had forced him into flight, I could not tell, unless those we followed were so discouraging pursuit.

I listened. He had not answered, and my only hope now was to pick up sounds in the haze. I did hear such and hobbled along, putting my ankle to painful strain.

Then there was utter silence, and I called, "Oomark! Oomark!"

I heard a whimpering such as that which had first guided me to him. And I tried to steer for its source. The space here was once more filled with blazing shapes. In fact, their strident coloring was worse and kept me rubbing at my tormented eyes.

At last I ran into a parallelogram of pulsating yellow. But though I saw thus, what scratched and tore

at me were thorned branches. I staggered back, crying out, my hands streaming small trickles of blood. Falling to my knees, I looked down. All I saw was velvety gray. However, when I ran my hands across that surface, what I felt was the grit of earth and sand, the softness of moss or very short-stemmed grass.

The fact that touch and sight were no longer allied did not at the moment mean so much as that Oomark was gone and now I could not even hear the whimpering. I crouched and called, listening.

"Oomark! Oomark!"

My voice roused only a faint, distressing echo like a moan. Should I blunder on? But I could not be sure of direction.

"Oomark?"

This time there was an answer— a muffled cry, from the other side of the growth into which I had run. But how far on the other side? If he would just keep on answering—!

"Oomark!"

Answer he did, though I could not make out any words, only sound. I floundered on, taking care to avoid contact with any other shape, though they blazed about me until they reminded me of leaping flames.

"Oomark!"

I had been so sure my last answer had come from a distance that I was startled when he replied from close before me.

"I'm here."

He sat on the ground, and somehow he seemed to have taken on some of that gray hue, so that only when he moved was I able to see him. And as I dropped down, spent, not too far away, I blinked and blinked against the pain, against the tears, trying to see him better. Because there was something—

I was not mistaken about his blending so well with the gray. He must have taken several tumbles to cover himself with soil, for he *was* gray, all gray— Or was it my sight? Fearfully I rubbed at my eyes. No, I could still see the orange and yellow, crimson and scarlet.

But Oomark was gray—and his drab hue was darkening!

"I'm not going back—you can't make me! Bartare and the Lady, they don't want me to! If I go, they'll do something—something bad! I won't go!"

"All right." I was too tired to try to talk reason into him now. "You don't have to."

"You'll try and make me. I know you will!" He was aggressively hostile, and I thought that at any moment he might take off again. If he did, I had a strong feeling I would never find him again.

"No." I tried to be as emphatic as I could. "I won't. I'm too tired now to go any farther."

"That's 'cause you wouldn't eat the fruit." There was a malicious note in his voice. "You don't want to change—"

"Want to change?" I repeated dully.

"Yes. You have to change, you know. This place doesn't like you if you don't. If you change—why, then everything will be all right. Truly it will, Kilda!" His voice softened. He stretched out a gray hand as if to touch mine, though he did not quite set fingertip to my flesh.

Change—perhaps it was not my eyes, then, that saw Oomark growing more and more the color of the ground on which he sat.

"Are you changed, Oomark?"

"I guess so. But, Kilda, if you don't change, then I can't stay with you. And if I'm not with you— I don't want to be alone! Please, Kilda, don't make me be alone! Please!" He reached out both hands as if he would clutch at me. Yet, I noted, he seemed unable to complete that gesture. He either could not or would not touch me.

When I put out my hand in return, he shrank back. Then he arose and moved slowly backward, his face turned to me, as if he were wary of some attempt on my part to seize him.

"You've got to change, Kilda, you've got to!"

He turned and ran to one of those flames. And so

much was the color like a blazing torch that I cried out. But when he retreated from the haze of light, he had in his two hands a blob of quivering stuff. This he thrust at me.

"Eat it, Kilda. You've just got to eat it!"

What might have led to a struggle, for he was determined I saw, to force it on me, never happened, for from between two fiery columns sounded a strange noise.

It was choked, husky. It might have been a mumble of words in an unknown language. Oomark dropped the jelly blob. He looked over his shoulder to give a shriek of terror.

Then he ran, passing out of my reach. After him, touching first one point to the ground and then another, was a dark purple thing, which might have been two triangles welded together in the middle. From it emitted the gobbling noise, as if it struggled to call out in recognizable speech.

Awkward as it looked, it was swiftly following Oomark with purpose. I could not guess what it was, but Oomark's reaction suggested something terrible.

It bumped past me and was gone, crashing in the boy's wake. I tried to hit it with the supply bag as it passed. But either my aim was poor, or else no touch affected it. And it showed no interest in me.

Somehow I arose and started in the wake of hunted and hunter. It had all happened so quickly that at first I was moved perhaps by instinct alone. Then the full horror of that chase urged me on. That Oomark still ran and the purple thing trundled after him, I was assured by sounds.

I was not to be a part of that chase very long, for suddenly a long ripple of crimson writhed out just ahead of me. I couldn't avoid what twined between my feet and brought me crashing to earth in a fall hard enough to drive both breath and sense out of me.

Dark—it was very dark. There was some reason why I must move. That need prodded at me savagely. Now I crawled, dragging forward inches at a time. Still that need would not let me rest.

My hands, outstretched to pull me on, suddenly plunged into wetness. Liquid rippled about my wrists. Water! I craved that water more than anything I ever had in my life. I dragged on farther, to fall again, my face in the water. Then I drank and drank, as if I could never get my fill. It was so sweet and good. I must still have been drinking when I lapsed once more into darkness.

I awoke from a sleep so profound that I did not even know a stir of memory until I sat up and looked around in childish wonder.

There was no sunlight. A thought stirred—what was sun? Bright warmth should be overhead. I turned up my face to a sky that was silver-gray, through which mist arose in curls. There was no direct source of the light that I could detect.

I stirred uneasily as memory awoke. My eyes no longer hurt. Why—this was a normal, natural world in which there were no blazing shapes. I was beside a pool into which fed a miniature fall of water, from which trickled a small rill over which hung plants with tall fresh green leaves shaped like the blades of ancient swords. In the midst of each cluster of those blades, as if it were some treasure they were bared to defend, stood a stalk of darker green crowned with large white flowers, each petal tipped with a spot of silver glitter.

Farther away were bushes, each heavy with flowers, cream white or silver pale. Nowhere, as I turned my head slowly to view the hollow where I was, were there any colors save the shades of white and cream of the flowers, the silver gray of the rocks, the green of the foliage.

I cupped my hands and drank again. And I remembered everything.

Oomark? But that other world—I must somehow have returned to Dylan. Then what of the children? Were they back, too? Or were they still entrapped, over there—in there—however you might deem it. I must find them—or get help to find them.

"Oomark!"

As I got to my feet, my body was curiously light, restored. I felt no pain, no ache, no fatigue now. I was not hungry. I was only impatient.

"Oomark?"

Studying the disturbed moss and soil, I could see the track I had made crawling to the pool. Perhaps if I backtracked—

I had, indeed, left a well-marked trail, first through a break in the wall of flowering shrubs and then between trees. There was a strong fragrance from the flowers, and among them gently fluttered gauzy-winged creatures that were never still enough for me to be sure whether they were birds or very large insects. The trees had dark green leaves. And here and there among them were large, plate-flat flowers such as a small child might draw, a round center, each petal distinct. These were green also, but much lighter and brighter. And some had touches of blue at petal tip, while others showed a faint silvery dusting. Yet both kinds grew on the same tree.

Though I had an urgent need to hunt the children, yet I looked about me as I went, for it seemed I could see details more clearly than I ever had in my life before.

The marks I followed ended at last in a place where there were footprints instead. Seeing those, my belief that I had won free from the other world was shattered, for I read my own boot marks. And those followed and in some places overlaid earlier spoors, consisting of smaller prints overrun again by larger. The large ones were oddly shapeless, so I could not be sure what manner of creature had left them, save that they must be those of Oomark's pursuer.

So I followed that new trail. It led on, dodging among the trunks of the trees, as if Oomark had fled, intent only on outdistancing whatever followed him. My fear grew as I ran as fast as I could in the same direction.

Here the trees grew farther apart. I came out of the woods into open land, though mist limited my range

of vision. When I glanced back, I could see fog closed in behind me.

Trees gave way to bushes, many of them hung with the perfumed flowers. Something swooped over my head and was gone. Some bird or flying thing must be coursing prey.

I had a growing sensation that I was under observation. Twice I stopped short and turned to look along my back trail. Though I sighted nothing moving there, yet the feeling that something had just scuttled into hiding was strong.

The trail I followed, which had been so clear to read in the muck of the woodland, was harder to discern here. I caught only a few faint impressions, and sometimes in an open patch the marks of Oomark's boots or the imprint of the shapeless foot of his hunter. Once I lost them altogether and had to circle back and forth until I found some smudged and beaten-down grass, which, I thought at first with a leap of fear, must mark Oomark's capture. Yet, to reassure me, there was beyond a boot mark.

He had made a sharp turn to the right. And I wondered if he had been trying to head back to the woods, away from the open, for there was no more cover here save grass. That was very thick and lush, brushing above my ankles as I moved.

The peculiar misty atmosphere hid the trees from which I had come. It enclosed me in a small bit of open, which moved with me, as if I were under some perambulating cover designed never to permit me to see very far. Now there pushed up through the grass, rocks, until I was among some towering as tall as trees. When I reached that point, I heard sobbing, alerting me to danger by its very hopelessness.

So warned, I crept on as softly as I could, taking care in the setting of my feet among the gravel and small stones thickly strewn among the rocks, until I came to a place where I could look down a slope.

Just within the wall of mist were those I sought.

Oomark was wedged between two stones, as if he had fought his way into a very cramped pocket of safety. He was crying, though it was more a kind of bleating, a sound that might come from a human being who had been driven by fear into the escape of near-mindlessness. And he kept moving his hands feebly in a pushing motion, as if so to defend himself against some attacker.

Yet that which had hunted him was not close but rather kept a goodly distance away, pacing back and forth, as if some invisible wall stood between him and the boy. Him—it—that— I drew a breath of disbelief, but I was also sure that my eyes reported truly the form of what prowled there. Man-sized, humanoid in general shape, it was like no man nor alien I had ever seen. Its shoulders were thick and bowed, which made its too large head bob forward when it moved, rather than be held erect. Its arms were long, its legs thick, and it was covered with a mat of black hair, curly as an animal pelt. Yet it was no animal—for on and over that furry body were ragged remnants of clothing, twisted and tied together, as if, though the creature might have been far more comfortable to discard them, it clung to those as one might cling to a charm.

Now and again it stopped and turned toward Oomark, and I could hear the same unintelligible mumble it had voiced when on the chase. But Oomark did not answer, nor did he move, except to continue those pushing motions.

I wondered why the creature had not gone in and plucked the boy out of that poor refuge. Certainly its strength was infinitely more than that of the frightened child. Yet it was obvious that for some reason it could not carry through whatever purpose had led to the hunt.

And its indecision or inability gave me a chance at rescue. I shrugged the storage bag off my shoulder. Its present contents I stuffed into the front of my tunic. Then I began to search about me for stones of suitable size and weight.

7

With the weighted bag in my hand, I slipped along, using the rocks as a screen. That monstrous figure had gone back to pacing. The pacing was so ponderous and deliberate that I thought that its reactions might not be too quick. Yet one could not be sure. To undervalue your opponent may be disastrous.

I watched that prowl, judging the right moment for attack. Then I leaped, swinging the bag and bringing it down full force, aiming at the monster's head. But my improvised weapon was awkward, and the blow landed glancingly along the shoulder below.

However, it had hit hard enough to make the beast thing cry out. It reeled away and went to its knees. I passed it and reached the rocks where Oomark was. Once there, I whirled to meet any attack the thing might launch.

It was still on its knees, one paw at the shoulder I had struck. And it made a mewling sound, shaking its head. How long it would be so incapacitated I could not tell. I reached for Oomark, though he tried feebly to beat me off. Somehow I clawed him out of his crevice.

He struggled, plainly too overwrought to know who I was, fighting for his freedom. I was bitten, scratched, but I held grimly, trying in the meantime to soothe him with my voiced assurances that he was no longer alone.

I do not know which form of reassurance finally reached him, or whether it was just that he was too

tired to struggle longer. At last he collapsed in my hold, a limp weight. I groped for the bag with one hand, while I steadied him against me with the other.

The beast thing was still occupied with its hurt. Only, even as I dared to believe we might escape, that hairy head swung around to face us. There was little sign of nose, and the eyes were so deep-set in twin pits they could not be seen. The mouth was a slit, now well open as if the creature struggled for breath. And the fangs so revealed were such threatening armament as made my poor bag of stones a straw opposed to a laser.

"Oomark!" I tried to put command in my tone, to reach through the fear that made him captive. It was plain that I could not carry him and defend us, too. "Oomark! We must get away. Do you understand?"

I could feel the painful shuddering of the small body pressed to mine. He gasped, but he did answer me.

"Kilda?" It was as if he suddenly was aware I now stood between him and the source of his fear.

"Yes, I am Kilda!" There was no longer any time for lengthy soothing. We must be on the move before that thing fronted us again. I controlled my impatience as I added, "I have come, Oomark. But you must help me now. Can you walk if I hold your hand? I cannot carry you."

"Kilda—that thing!" His hold kept me from moving. "It'll get us!"

"Not if we go away." I kept my voice low. "I hit it, Oomark. It is hurt. But we must go before it can stop us."

The boy turned his head a little to look. And as Oomark did so, my own hand brushed the top of his head. I must have uttered a cry of surprise, for he tightened hold on me again.

However, it was no action of the beast that had startled me. It was what my hand had found on my charge's head, what I could see when I looked for them. Evenly spaced, one above each temple, Oomark had small protuberances. The lumps were too regular to be bumps

gained during his flight. Nor did they seem sore, for he had not flinched when my touch crossed them.

I gave him closer study. It was true his skin was a curious gray. And along his small arms and legs, where his tunic and breeches were torn and showed skin, there was a soft fluff of fine hair growing. He was changed, changed into something far different from a small human boy!

For a moment I even forgot the hairy thing, our common enemy. But a sound louder than its heretofore mewling made me face it. The creature was on its feet, but it moved unsteadily. And I began to hope that, glancing as my blow had been, I had injured it somewhat.

It tottered a step or two in our direction. I had the cord of the bag tight in my hand, ready, and I swung it. I meant that to ready it for a blow. But the creature must have taken it as a warning. It stopped.

I saw its slit lips work and spittle in the corners of its mouth, as if it were engaged in some struggle. Then it lifted one paw and held it out, palm up and empty, in a gesture of appeal, while those writhing lips shaped two words, garbled and far from clear human speech, yet understandable.

"No—friend—"

That reaching hand went to its throat, grasping and tearing at the hairy skin there, as if it were so frustrated at its inability to make me understand that it would tear the words from its vocal cords.

After a long moment I began to move. Now it made plain, by the best way it knew, that it was opening a passage for us. How much this change in attitude could be trusted, I had no idea. However, it was true that it might have pulled Oomark from the rocks with very little effort, and it had not. I would have to take the chance—

While I so hesitated, it turned its back on us. Still holding hand to shoulder, it shuffled away. Nor did it turn to gaze in our direction again, but continued out

of sight. Was this all a sham, and would it stalk us, lay some ambush among the rocks?

Staying here was no solution. I thought that, in spite of the mist, I might be able to get back to the woods, perhaps to the pool where I had awakened. Only—what would that avail me? The important thing was, I was convinced, to find Bartare and this mysterious Lady. A door opens two ways, and if one had brought us here, it should let us go again. It need only be that we find it. And the best way to do that was to discover who held the key.

"That thing is gone." Gently I took Oomark's head and turned it so that he could see for himself. "Now, while it is gone, we must go, too."

"Now—quick before it comes again!" His grip on my belt pulled me toward the open. But I had had my fill of wandering. We must go only with a goal in sight.

"Oomark, you want to get away from this place, this whole world, don't you?"

He did not raise his head to face me squarely, but shot a look at me in an odd, sidewise fashion. With a second shock I saw that his eyes were no longer a warm brown but hard and glinting gold, such as I had never seen in a human face before.

"Away from here—" he echoed. "Yes, please, Kilda! Before the thing comes back!"

"Oomark, do you still know where Bartare is?"

Another glance from those golden eyes. "I always know. She doesn't care—not any more."

"Why?"

"Because—because—" His small face screwed up in perplexity. "I guess because it doesn't matter now."

I wanted to know why it did not matter. But somehow I could not bring myself to ask. Instead, I inquired, "Can you find her now?"

He looked at me directly, with a long, searching, unchildlike stare. There was something cold, aloof, not of the Oomark that I knew in it.

Then he nodded. "Now I can. Come on!"

He grasped my hand and pulled me to the left and

away from the rocks. At least, unless the creature had circled back once he was out of sight, we were heading away from where it had disappeared into the mist.

"I'm hungry," he announced a moment or so later.

His recovery from the abject terror and mindless state of a short time earlier seemed very rapid. I marveled at it a little, wondering whether it were natural or another manifestation of the change in him.

"Good enough. I have rations." I put my hand to the bulge of things I had stored in the front of my tunic.

He made a face. "Not that rubbish—real food."

"It's real enough," I assured him, "even if it is a little banged about. Let's find a place away from these stones, and we'll eat." Now that he mentioned food, I found I was also hungry.

The area of stones became stretches only of sand and gravel. But this was the most colorful thing I had yet seen among the greens and whites, for many of the smaller pebbles were of deep, warm colors, reminding me a little of the brilliance through which we had earlier come.

Oomark released my hand and darted away, then stooped to root something out of the ground. He returned holding a fan-shaped growth that was dark purple—its fleshy leaves veined with green.

"Good!" He waved it before me, and a torn strip of his sleeve fluttered to show his arm where the growth of fine gray hair looked to be even thicker and longer than before. He carefully broke the plant in two and offered me one section, nibbling at the other with every evidence of enjoyment.

I shook my head. I was sure I could not force his half from him. But to mouth that strange thing myself I could not.

He chewed and swallowed. "But it is good!" he urged, plainly surprised at my refusal.

"You can have it. But save some room for real food." Again my hand went to my tunic front to reassure myself I carried what he needed there, though how long that small store could last, I did not know. It was prob-

ably only a matter of time before I would be driven to consume just such a thing as that Oomark now relished.

We found a resting place. I thought it safe, for we were in the open, with no cover more than a boulder waist high to me—and I could see on all sides. Oomark was willing enough to halt there.

As he sat down on the ground, he pulled at the seals of his boots. "My feet hurt. They feel as if my boots don't fit any more. I'm going to see why—"

His buoyant return to normalcy after his fright still amazed me a little. I would not have believed his recuperative powers so great, but I was thankful this was so.

As he unsealed his boots, I took out the various containers I had crammed into my tunic. And though I could really have eaten all in sight, I opened only one package, breaking the thick slab it contained into two portions. It was one of the fruit-protein cakes, giving high energy level. The taste was very good.

Yet when I picked up my portion and held it to my lips, I found its faint odor offensive. It was necessary to force myself to chew and swallow, and I took no pleasure in its taste. I remembered Oomark's earlier aversion to the choc. And I wondered if, having sampled the food or drink of this world, one was left with a strong dislike for one's natural food. Stubbornly I ate the chunk. And the longer I worked at it, the less obnoxious it became, so that the last bite or two was normal tasting.

"This is yours." I held the other half out to Oomark.

He shook his head. "Don't want it. It's spoiled or something. I can smell it's bad clear over here. You oughtn't eat a mess like that, Kilda. It might make you sick."

And he absolutely refused to sample any of the supplies I had. Since I could not feed him by force, I had to accept that he had been sufficiently satisfied by the plant he had eaten.

Perhaps later, if he found no more such and was

really hungry— I slipped off my outer tunic and made a bag of it that I could attach to my belt. The storage bag must remain a weapon. The air was warm and caressing against the skin of my arms. Though I had on only an under tunic, sleeveless and low-necked, above the waist, I was not cold.

The gray light seemed to give my bared skin a new color. I was not gray as Oomark; rather my naturally brown skin was even darker and more ruddy brown. It had a gloss as if polished with oil. Yet to the touch it felt normal. I wished for a mirror, and ran my hands over my head and face in its lack, trying to guess by touch what I looked like.

The result was not instantly horrifying as it had been when I had faced that terrifying reflection in my bedroom, but it was startling enough. In the first place, my hair, which had always curled so tightly that I had trouble dressing it and so kept it cropped closer than fashion dictated, was now in straight strands. I pulled one loose—not dark brown any more, but green. Unmistakably so!

Under my touch my eyes, nose, mouth were, as far as I could guess, as always. For so much I was thankful.

"That's better!" Oomark had pulled off his boots, tossed them to one side, as if he never wanted to see them again, and stretched his legs out before him.

His feet—no! At that moment I could have screamed denial of what I saw, except that I was too frightened to utter any sound at all. They were no longer human feet. Rather the toes had grown together, so that what I looked upon was something midway between a deformed foot and a cloven hoof, while the furry hair above it was much longer and thicker.

"Oomark—" Though I shrank from doing so, I made myself reach out and touch the horny section of hoof and slide up to the fur above it. I had hoped, wildly, that this was an optical illusion, that I would feel a normal foot.

But it was not so. Oomark's hoofs, his haired legs,

could be felt as well as seen—just as my green lank hair had been real when I plucked it from my scalp.

"I can walk a lot better now," he announced. Apparently the sight of hoofs did not in the least bother him. He might have expected to see such when he pulled off his boots. He kicked out his feet, as one might do when released from punishing restraint.

As I surveyed him closely from those hoofs to the top of his head, I saw something else. Those bumps on his temples were appreciably larger. They were no longer round or covered with skin. Instead, they were curved, tipped, a cream-white—they were horns!

There comes a time when one has been faced by too many shocks, and thereafter the not-to-be-believed can be accepted passively. I had somehow progressed to that point. Or else I was in such a state of shock that I found nothing abnormal. Strange, yes, but it did not add to my fear.

When we started on, I again had that feeling that we were followed. But the veil of mist was so thick that I could only make sure, by frequent glances behind, that whoever or whatever skulked there was not in close range.

Oomark did not pick up his discarded boots, but left them lying where he had thrown them. Twice more he jerked the purple plants free of the soil and munched on them, each time offering me some. I wanted none of them. The one time I took a bit to examine it more closely, I found the smell as offensive as he seemed to find the supplies. Even the touch of its leaves against my fingers made me brush them back and forth across my breeches after I had thrown it away.

"How far are we from Bartare?" I demanded when it seemed there would come no end to our journey. This country was open meadowland with thick, lush grass, not even a bush to break the open lines of it. The grass had odd peculiarities, for there were circles seemingly exact in their marking. Their rims were indicated by a taller and noticeably darker green growth. I saw that Oomark avoided stepping on any of those darker bands

when he crossed them. And I followed his example, partly because inborn wariness suggested all precautions were good.

We were in the middle of one such when I asked my question. He had taken the lead. Now he glanced back over his shoulder, his horns even more evident. Also I saw his once small ears were elongated, rising to a very noticeable point at the top.

"I don't know. She is there—" He pointed ahead into the mist with confidence.

But where was "there"? He seemed to have no idea and finally became sulky when I pressed, saying that he could not tell—that he only knew she was ahead and, if we went far enough, we would find her. I eyed the mist uncertainly. Though I had no way of measuring its advance, I was quite sure that I had had a far greater range of visibility at the beginning of this journey and that the outer veil was moving in restrictingly, which was not pleasant to consider, the more so when I firmly believed we were being trailed. Suppose that drifting stuff circled about us as thickly as some fogs I had seen, so we were lost in it? Then we would be easy prey for anything.

It would be better to find some shelter and hole up until the fog lifted or cleared to the point it had held when I had come out of the woods. But before I could suggest that, Oomark moved closer. His nose, appearing larger than natural, with wide, flaring nostrils, was turned to the left, and he seemed to be testing for scent.

"Best we stay here, in a ring of the Folk," he said. "There be others abroad." Not only his appearance had changed; his speech was also odd, the choice of words different. Now his actions surprised me, for he went to his hands and knees and crept about the inner perimeter of the circle, his head close to the ground, plainly sniffing gustily as he went. When he had completed that circle, he squatted back on his hoofs.

"This is a fair place." He patted the ground on either side with his hands. "The others cannot break a ring,

you know. We bide here now till outdraw comes again—"

I sat down so I could closer study his altered face, hoping that the expression there might help me.

"What others are there, Oomark?"

"The others—the Dark Ones. They and the Folk are never one. But here one of the Folk is safe, unless it is lot time and he is the sad-chosen." He shivered as might one thinking of some well-known terror.

"And who are the Folk?" I continued gently. The Oomark I had known was almost gone, lost in this alien child. I longed to somehow catch and hold fast a last poor remnant, but how I might do that, I did not know.

"The Folk? Be you mist-witted, Kilda. All know the Folk—you—me—"

"Bartare—the Lady?"

"All, yes, all." He nodded.

"And the others? Was it one such who chased you?"

I thought he looked a little puzzled. "He was not—not of the Dark Ones, nor of the Folk. He is One Between." He made of the word "between" a species name. "As you will be, Kilda, if you don't watch out!" He shot that last at me like a threat.

In fact, I glanced at my own arms and hands to be sure there was no harsh growth of hair showing on them, that I was not changing into a monster like the one I had wounded with my bag of stones. But my skin, though dark and shining, was still smooth.

"How will I become that?"

"If you do not accept, you will not be accepted." He said that solemnly. He might have been uttering a rule of law.

"Halfway you have come. But more than halfway must the journey take you. Take off your boots, put your feet to the earth—feel!"

I hesitated. Oomark had shucked his foot covering to display hoofs. If I pulled mine off, would I be fronted by a similar distortion? I tried to wriggle my toes—was sure I felt them move. But I must know! I drew off the boots.

My feet! No, I did not have hoofs, but they were not as I had always seen them either. The toes were longer, thinner. They appeared to uncoil, to show an extra joint on each as I released them. And they were far more prehensile than any human toes should be. These new, flexible ends curved down without my willing it and dug into the soil.

And throughout my body I felt a shock, as if those toes, in so sinking into the ground, had encountered therein a source of energy that flowed back through them up my legs, into my body. I jerked them free, trying to force on my boots again.

But that could not be done. The longer toes might not be accommodated therein without such crippling as would mean I could not walk. And they wriggled independently as I tried to crowd them together and fit them into those coverings, as if they had a life of their own and were determined to return to the soil.

Finally I ripped loose the inner lining of my boots, and these strips I bound around and around my feet with a vindictive tightness. I might not be dealing with my own flesh and bone, but with rebellious entities that fought me.

Once they were thus bandaged so that none of their bare surface could touch the ground, they became quiet. And I could almost believe those wrappings hid a normal human foot. I would have to go on without my boots, but the wrappings were a safeguard I dared not relinquish.

"That was not a clever thing to do, Kilda," Oomark commented. "It is better you come into the paths of the Folk, lest you be lost, for you are not of the Dark Ones—"

"I am Kilda c' Rhyn," I said defiantly. "I am not of this world! Nor are you, Oomark Zobak!"

He laughed then, and something in that laughter was not in the least childlike.

"Oh, but you are, Kilda, as am I. And there will be no denial left in you soon. None at all."

8

At that moment I wanted no argument, for there was something about Oomark now. Though he was still a small boy, in some ways he was secretive, older. I did not like those sly glances he sent in my direction now and then—gloating—satisfaction at my difficulties, a searching for a change in me?

Once more I took out food. But he would have nothing of what I offered. I ate, a much smaller portion than I wanted. But I must ration myself. These supplies could not be renewed.

It began to rain, or else the mist, which had grown thicker and thicker, condensed on our bodies. I could see no farther than the outside of the ring in which we sat. Oddly enough, the heavy moisture did not make me uncomfortable.

There was a strange sensation in my scalp, and I raised my hands to discover my hair was not plastered to my skull by the damp but stood erect, and it could not be forced flat save by keeping a hand pressed upon it. The wet on my skin and in my hair took away my thirst.

When I glanced at Oomark, I saw him licking the down on the back of his hands (for it grew there now), even up his arms, just as a cat might perform its toilet fastidiously when wet, though he did not appear uncomfortable.

Then, with a jerk, his head snapped up, and he stared over my shoulder. I pushed around to gaze in the same

direction. At first I could see only the billowing mist. Then I was aware of a darker shape that did not drift with that mist but pushed against it. Though I could not hear the slightest sound, it was padding about the circumference of the ring. Was it what had followed us?

I reached for the weighted bag. How I longed for a stunner, though a laser beamer would have been best. However, the thing, whatever it was, was never more than a dark shape.

Oomark slewed around, following it with his eyes as it moved. I wondered if he could see more of it than I did.

"What is it?"

"A Dark One."

His nostrils expanded as if to test the air, and then he added, "It cannot come within the ring. Also"—his head lifted a little higher—"there is something else out there."

At that moment I smelled enough to make me turn my head in disgust, a nauseating odor. Long decay and filth blew a puff of stench across our refuge. I must have uttered an exclamation, for I heard Oomark say, "That is the Dark One. Always do they smell so. But the other thing—"

He stood up. The dark shadow passed before him on its round. But Oomark continued to look into the mist ahead of him. A moment later he shook his head.

"It is there. I think it watches, but I do not know what it may be, save it does not stink like a Dark One."

What more he might have said was drowned out in a high, carrying sound, which made me shiver. And that clarion call or trumpet summons was answered—from so close by that I thought it might be that shadow beyond the ring wall. The answer came as a low, snarling growl.

Once more the call, surely a summons, a demand, so imperative was it. The growling followed, a protest, a sullen whine. But on the third sounding of that horn,

there was no growl, rather a deep, carrying bellow, perhaps the answer demanded.

Oomark squatted down again, his arms about his knees, balling himself as if to make as small a target as possible to escape notice. I saw his shoulders shake in a series of shudders. His head rested now on his knees, so I could not see his face.

Though I searched the wall of the mist, I could no longer sight that dim shadow, nor did the stench of it linger. Off in the gray billows the horn gave another blast. Now there was no questing note in it, rather a gloating, a promise of worse to come. Before its echoes died away, there was a yapping, a noise that sent my hands in an involuntary gesture to cover my ears. I wanted to sink into the earth and pull protecting sods over me.

"What is it?" I asked Oomark in a half-whisper. He seemed to know so much of this place, and his fear was now so apparent that I thought he could set name to the nameless.

"The *hunt!* Ahhhh—" His words lapsed into a moan of pure fear. "He hunts—"

"Who?" I grasped at Oomark's shoulder. He aimed a blow at me in return, as if in his present state he did not know friend from enemy. "Who? Tell me!" I shook him.

"The driver of Dark Ones." Those strange yellow eyes through which Oomark surveyed this alien world were fixed on the mist wall. His tongue licked his lips. "He calls his pack to a hunting—"

There was nothing to reassure one. Still holding to Oomark, I listened, straining to pick up any sound in the dank mist. But when the horn pealed again, it was fainter, farther off, and the hideous yapping that answered it was barely audible.

I felt Oomark relax a little. Once more he licked his lips. He sniffed the air.

"The dark hound is gone," he reported.

I knew that I must have out of Oomark all he knew or suspected about this world. To travel on blindly, not

knowing from which side and at what moment danger might leap, was too great a risk. Knowledge was my hope.

"Oomark, you must tell me what you know of this world—of things such as the Dark Ones and the hunter—"

Again he looked at me cornerwise, slyly.

"Please, Oomark. If we are to go on, I must know what dangers lurk here."

He shrugged. "It is of your choosing that you do not understand for yourself. You would be of that other place, not wholly of this."

I rebelled. "I am not in the least of this place! I would return to my *own* place."

"See?" He spread out his hands in a gesture of baffllement. "You choose to be one in the middle. And the hunter of Dark Ones—and such as he—can therefore hunt you. You ask to know— The means are before you, but you will not take them."

"Oomark!" I drew on all my store of patience. "Tell me what you can."

The boy hesitated. I thought, "If he does refuse, what means have I of forcing him to it?"

Then he said slowly, "I do not know everything, save that when something such as the hunter's horn sounds, then here"—he touched his forehead—"there comes knowledge. I know what can be eaten and drunk, what we may meet on this road, and whether it be friend or foe. But before it happens, I do not know, truly. It is only when I see or hear—"

That he spoke the truth, I did not doubt. Now before I could urge any more out of him, he raised his head a little and pointed with his chin.

"The One Between, who was by the rocks, he is here."

"What does he want?" Oomark seemed so certain, as if he could actually see the hairy creature.

"He hungers—"

My mind made a horrifying guess. Were *we* the prey the thing trailed? I tightened my hold on the bag and prepared to do my best in our defense.

Oomark touched my arm and shook his head. "Not us. His is not the way of the hunter. No, he hungers for what you carry—the food from the other place."

"Why?"

"I do not know, only that it draws him. He wants it so badly that it means the whole world to him. He can think of nothing else, only that. So I can in turn feel his great hunger in me." Oomark put his hands to his middle, rubbing himself.

But why? Why would a creature of this world want my few supplies? Not that he would get them, I told myself fiercely. I had that bundle safely under my hand, and the bag was also ready for any attack.

"Yes, that is what he wants. He will follow as long as there is strength in him. He is hurt, you know. When you struck him, he was hurt. Here." Oomark fingered his own shoulder, lightly, as if dreading to put pressure on some wound.

"Still he is very strong—" I remembered only too well the bulk of the creature, and I had no desire to face new attack.

"He is tired, and he hurts. Now he has found another ring and rests in it. But when we go on, he will follow." Oomark reported confidently, and I believed him. So it would be up to us to lose or discourage that follower.

Oddly enough, though I had been tired when settling in this ring, I had no desire to sleep. Nor, it seemed, did Oomark. Though we talked but little thereafter, we spent the passing of time (and how much time, I could not calculate) as if we were waiting for some signal. However, it was not a waiting that made me uneasy or impatient. Rather it was a languid, quiet period between two bouts of action.

We heard no more sounds. Nor did any shadows move now in the mist. Finally I became aware that the curtain was lifting, that I was able to see more. Oomark got to his feet, or rather his hoofs.

"It is the period of outgo. Let us be on our way. I am hungry."

I made as if to open the supply bag. He shook his head.

"I want real food—not that which makes one sick to smell! Come on!"

With that he gave a bound that cleared the darker green of the ring rim, his small hoofs clattering on a stretch of rock beyond. I looked at my boots. It was plain I could not put those on again. The bandaging must serve me for foot covering. And there was no reason to burden myself with useless things. So I left them lying as I moved after the boy.

The lifting of the mist came more swiftly. The ground where we had halted was level and had many rings of various sizes across it. Not too far away one of those rings was occupied. The hunched figure now getting awkwardly to its feet was that of the creature who had hunted Oomark. The tatters it wore for clothing fluttered in a breeze. It had turned its head in our direction. One arm hung by its side. But the other moved, and it extended its empty hand, palm up. I could see the mouth working as it had before when the creature tried to speak.

Again that effort was mighty, convulsive, until my fear was touched with a trace of sympathy. Even I could see it meant no harm, at least for now; it was pleading with us for that which I carried. Why would it so want the food Oomark disdained? The slit mouth worked, spatters of spittle showing in the corners. And the hand, trembling as if it were an effort to hold it so, stretched beseechingly to me.

"Come on!" Oomark had drawn ahead. He looked back impatiently. "I want food."

"Fooooood—" The word was a distorted mockery of the boy's, but the creature had uttered it.

I held the supplies tight to me in the crook of my arm while I swung the weighted bag with my other hand. Yet still I hesitated. And in that moment I knew that I could not do what all good sense told me was safe. I took the thong of the stone bag between my

teeth, holding it ready. Then I thrust my hand in among the supplies. Without looking, I grabbed what I first touched. It was a choc piece.

Without watching, lest I grow more generous than I dared to be, I threw that in the general direction of the creature and ran on after Oomark.

But the boy had halted, and when I caught up with him, he was scowling.

"Why did you do that?"

"Because—I was sorry for—"

"For *that?*" He laughed in a way I did not like as he pointed.

I turned, to see the creature crouched low to the ground, pulled in upon itself as Oomark had been at the sound of that dread horn. It was making no move to follow us.

"What—what is the matter?"

"You were sorry." He mocked me, his lips grinning in a smile that was not pleasant, which reminded me of—Bartare! "You were sorry. But he is sorrier now!" The boy stabbed a finger at the quiet figure.

"Why?"

"You gave him food—now look at him! It hurts and hurts and hurts. And he deserves that hurting! He is neither one thing nor the other. Maybe he'll be nothing at all shortly."

"Oomark—" I tried to catch his arm, but he eluded me, laughing hatefully. "That food—did it poison him?"

"If it did not, he'll wish that it had. You will, too, Kilda, you will, too. Look at yourself—just look!"

It was his turn to grab my arm and swing it up before my eyes in a hold tight enough to bruise.

That brown shine on my skin had increased. There was a kind of hard shell developing from my flesh. I jerked away, refusing to look.

"You cannot stop it, you know." Oomark had lost some of his mockery. "Look at me!" He danced from one small hoof to the other, turning so that I could see him from every angle. His hands pulled at his tunic, loosening it. Now he threw that and his under tunic

from him so he was bare to the waist. Bare—no! His small body was completely covered with a soft gray down. It was thinner on his arms and shoulders—I could see through it to his skin—but at his waist it grew longer and thicker.

"Put on your clothes!" I tried to give that order my old authority.

"No!" He kicked at one of the tunics. "No!" He stretched wide his arms and capered in a grotesque dance. "Those are hot. They scratch. I do not need them any more—ever!" He went skittering away, as if he feared I would catch and try to clothe him by force. Unlike the discarded boots, I did not leave them lying. Rather I rolled them tightly and stuffed them into the top of the stone bag.

"Come on!" He beckoned to me. But I glanced back once more at the hairy thing.

Was Oomark right? Had the food the alien begged for so piteously indeed proven poison? But if our natural food had been fatal to it, why had it—or he—wanted it so badly—dogged us, begged? And if our food was poison to a creature of this world, would it not follow that native food would be so to us? I had eaten nothing save from what I carried. But Oomark—

I put all thoughts of the stricken creature out of my mind to run after the boy, determined that this time I would not allow him to take such a risk.

But it was too late, for he stood beside a large bush or small tree planted at one end of a mound. It was heavy with golden berries, and Oomark was not the only feaster. From some of the branches hung those gauzy-winged things I had seen in the woods. And in the grass were small animals.

Neither winged things nor animals took any notice of Oomark, nor did they when I approached. They were too intent upon feeding. The berries were large, perhaps the size of my thumb, and so full of juice that they spattered widely when their skin broke. Oomark pushed them into his mouth three and four together,

so the juice trickled down his chin, dripping into the hair on his chest.

"Here." He held out a sticky hand, three of the globes on it. When I shook my head (and it took determination to do that, for they made me long to taste), he grinned. Then he shrugged and popped the refused berries into his own mouth.

I drew away, realizing I had no chance to stop him, afraid I might yield to temptation. I made special note of the mound by which that bush grew. It was odd to find it in that level land, and it gave the impression of being purposefully humped there for some forgotten reason. Also, it was only the first of a series of such that were erected in a straight line. I counted mine within the visibility limits of the mist.

Each of these had a bush or tree planted at one end. But not all of those were alike. Three were of the yellow fruit. Three bore larger spheres, which would fit into the palm of my hand, and these were a dark purple-red. At them no feasters crowded. In fact, there was something repellent about them. The leaves of the trees there were also not uniformly shaped, but irregular and of a green so dark as to be near black.

The other three trees had a much lighter foliage—a silver edge to long ribbony leaves of a very pale green. Their slender trunks and branches were not covered with rough bark, but smooth and of a silver shade also. They had no fruit, only clusters of white flowers, which swayed gently, even though there seemed to be no wind. Now and then I caught a whiff of a fragrance so sweet that I longed to run and bury my face in one of those clusters. But, like the purple fruit, they seemed to ward off touch, though I did not have the same distaste for them as I did for the dark fruit.

These trees were all planted in a pattern: first the golden berries, then the purple spheres, last the silver flowers. Then they began all over again, through the same series twice more. So I was very sure this was of a purpose. What were these mounds? Graves of rulers or priests now long forgotten? There hung about them

an aura of age, of settling into the earth, which did not come only from passing years, but also from the weight of centuries. Or were these the remains of buildings, soil-encased, perhaps the last of some ancient fortress?

It would seem Oomark had had his fill, for he came away from the bush to kneel and rub his hands in the grass, pulling up a tuft to smear the juice from his face, though his efforts at cleanliness were not too successful.

Then he turned about to face the mound and lifted both hands. Holding them palm out, he spoke, certainly not to me, nor to the hopping and flying things still feeding.

"My thanks, Sleeper, for the bounty of the table, the richness of the feast."

The words had the ring of ritual, a form of invoking the invisible. Once said, he did not linger, but came to me as one prepared for brisk action.

"Who is the Sleeper?"

Oomark looked puzzled and glanced back to the mound. "I don't know."

"But you said—"

"I said that because it is right and fitting. Don't be asking, asking, asking all the time, Kilda! If you would eat, you would know—you wouldn't have to ask!"

"I would know if I ate. Is that how you know, Oomark?"

"I guess so. Anyway, I know you thank the Sleeper after you eat here. The Folk always have."

He started away on a course that paralleled the first of the mounds, passing the purple fruit, coming to the silver flowers.

"What about these?" I still tried to add to my store of knowledge. "There are more fruit—"

"No!" He averted his gaze from the purple spheres. "You eat those—you die. Not all the Sleepers have kind thoughts for the Folk. You don't eat these, and you don't *touch* those!" He pointed to the flowers.

"Are they so deadly then?"

Again he seemed puzzled. "No—not in the same way.

It is—they might serve the Folk if they could, but it is not in them to do so." His frown of puzzlement grew deeper. "I really don't know, Kilda. The fruit is bad because the Sleeper there hates us. But the flowers—they are not enough like the Folk to be touched."

Three grades of Sleepers, I deduced—those offering the berries for refreshment, those dangerous and evil, and those too unlike the inhabitants to make contact. Or was I being fanciful now and reading too much into what I had seen and Oomark's words?

As we passed the mound with the silver tree, its clusters of flowers and the long banner-like leaves began to ripple. A wind of high force might have been tearing at them. Yet the trees at the flanking mounds showed no such troubling. Finally that tearing snapped a small branch heavily weighted with a ball of flowers. It did not fall to the ground, but rather whirled over and over through the air until it was thrust as one might thrust the pointed head of a spear, the splintered end down, into the ground at my feet.

Oomark cried out and backed away. On impulse I stooped and caught at the branch under the nodding flower cluster. It was like grasping a rod of ice, so cold was the sting from it that ran up my arm. Yet I could not let it go. Instead I pulled it from the grip of the soil.

The gale that had broken it free from its parent tree and brought it to me had ceased as if it had never blown. And—my fingers—!

The brown, hard crust over them was cracking, flaking away like a dusty powder. The flesh so uncovered was still brown, but it was the skin I had always known. Though my hand was still cold, I had no desire to throw the branch from me. Instead, I made it fast to my belt.

Oomark retreated again. "Throw it away—back to where it came from!" He gestured to the now quiet tree. "It will hurt you!"

I flexed my fingers and saw with awe and gratitude

the normal flesh. "Such hurt I will take gladly. See, Oomark, my hand is now as it always was!"

He cried out and ran from me as he had fled from the hairy creature. I might now have been a horror, hunting him.

9

He easily eluded me and sprinted away, paying no attention to first my commands and then my pleas. Rather, he sped as if with a definite refuge in mind. I was seized by the idea that his desertion could cut two ways: not only would I lose the child for whom I was responsible, but I myself would be lost without a guide as well.

Somehow I managed to keep sight of him, passing the last of the mounds. Beyond were more earthworks. Only they were not as sharply defined as the mounds, being more rolling.

Oomark did not avoid these, but ran into the midst of them. Well grown with grass, they raised on either side, now hiding him. I speculated, even as I ran, as to whether I was now in what might have been the last remnants of a great city. If so, very little remained to mark its walls and buildings.

Here and there, sometimes growing in small thickets, were stunted trees bearing the evil purple fruit—although that was shriveled-looking. Much of the harvest had fallen and lay rotting in the grass, a stench rising from it to plague the nostrils.

In fact, as more and more of such trees came into view, I found myself choking and coughing, having to slacken speed. Now I had lost sight of Oomark, who had gone beyond the barrier of the mist.

I started to run again, as fast as I could, calling out his name. Only the echoes of that, distorted as if

mouthed back at me by lips never intended to utter human speech, came to my ears. Then I heard a flapping sound, a croaking, and I looked to the left.

There stood several of the fruit trees. In them, under them, waddled, perched, and fed some feathered creatures. Or at first I thought them feathered until I saw better. They had the clawed, scaled feet of some domestic fowl. But supported on those were yellow bodies ending in long, supple tails. Necks, not so long but as limber, ended in pointed heads crested by four horns or growths of white, giving the creatures the appearance of wearing a small crown. The eyes were red and seemed to glow. Sharply pointed wings were feathered with broad yellow quills. And the creatures were ill-tempered, lashing at one another with those tails, threatening with beak and claw as they fought over the rotting fruit.

Though they were not large, there was a malevolence about them that promised ill for one attracting their attention. I stopped calling abruptly, hurried by, watching them carefully even after I passed, since I had an uneasy feeling they were only pretending to be so engrossed in feeding and were ready to trail me.

It must have been during those moments when I was intent upon the flying things that I lost my last hope of catching up with Oomark. Only a short distance beyond I faced a split into three of the ways I had followed. It was impossible to see any track on this thick turf to tell me which I should take.

Both the mist and the height of the barrows and mounds limited my sight. And, in addition, two of the ways, the one ahead and the one to the left, curved a little beyond, hiding their direction. Perhaps that made me decide upon the right fork, which seemed to run straighter.

Only, as I continued, those piles of turfed debris, or whatever the mounds might be, grew taller, until they were well above the level of my head. And the road did make a curve. I paused to listen now and then, hoping to pick up some sound to assure me that my choice had

been right. It was during one such pause that I sighted a scraped place where the turf had been torn off a stone—a trace that someone, or thing, *had* passed that way.

It caught my eye because the stone under it glowed so that it was noticeable even in this half-light that was dusk among the mounds. I approached, hoping to find it a footprint, and the glow deepened into a silvery radiance.

But it was only a scuff mark, having nothing to tell me, save that it was new done, and I wanted to believe Oomark had left it.

Having taken the first curve, I saw that my road became a baffling twist of in and out ways between towering mounds, much of it shadowed murkily. I began to fear that I had no hope of ever finding one who wished to remain hidden here. The way branched again, and again it was a root from which innumerable small rootlets sprang. Then it, too, narrowed and grew less.

I halted. The mounds that walled me in were perhaps twice my height, and the dusk in which I stood was almost as great as the danger period of indrawn mist. I did not like what I saw ahead—better go back to the original branch and take one of the other ways. It would perhaps not put me on the boy's track—I could not hope for such good fortune—but it might take me out of this haunted place.

Haunted it was—I would have sworn to that. I was sure that things flitted just beyond my range of sight or lurked spying on me. Sometimes I heard a ghostly, far-off twittering, like the rustle of breeze through dried leaves, which made me think of alien voices whispering. Also, though nowhere else in this world had I been conscious of a change of temperature, here there was a rising warmth. Only it carried no comfort with it. Rather it made me feel that I walked a thin skin of safety over consuming fires.

I licked my lips and thought of water. My feet moved almost of themselves, scuffing the earth, those long,

thin toes writhing within the bandages, as if to free themselves and dig in, seeking the energy that had so frightened me when I had first taken off my boots.

But when I turned to retrace my way, I discovered the full extent of my folly. All the winding ways looked alike, and I could not be sure which had brought me here or even of the general direction from which I had come. I felt trapped, and with that realization came panic, shattering my control. I ran along the nearest path and, when it split, went right, and when it split again, left, my heart pounding, my mouth dry with fear, my wits so overborne that I would have been easy prey in that moment. That I was in a place inimical to my form of life, I no longer doubted, just as I did not doubt that I was watched, with a dreadful sniggering anticipation such as I could not put name to, nor imagine form for.

The hardest thing I have ever done in my life was to make myself halt, gasping for breath, really look ahead, and force my brain to override emotion. It was true all ways looked alike, but I fiercely battled panic. I could not keep my feet still. They pounded and dug at the soil, as if they had a life of their own and were no longer under my command. And the desire to tear off the wrappings I had adjusted with such care, to feel the soil, was such an agony that I do not know how I held out.

Then a whiff of scent reached me, and I remembered the branch in my belt. Though it had been some time since I had picked it up, yet there was no wilting of leaves or blossoms. It might have been freshly broken from the tree. I touched its stem, and from that contact spread a feeling of clean cold—nowise else can I describe that sensation. Just as the heat generated by the land about me bore with it a sensation of filth and long decay, this cold was a knife to cleave to sanity and straight thinking.

On impulse I took the branch from my belt, and I leaned over, to sweep it lightly over my tormented feet. Though the bandages kept it from touching my flesh,

the toes stopped writhing. They no longer dug into the soil. So it was that when I went on, I carried it, fastening my food package to my belt in its place. In my other hand I still swung the weighted bag.

What I fronted as I rounded the end of the next mound was nothing that a stone-heavy bag could menace. For a single instant, a very short one, I thought that I had caught up with Oomark. Then I knew that the thing fronting me was not Oomark, even in transformation.

It was much larger, a little taller than I, and with a lot more bulk. The likeness to Oomark was in general form, for it balanced on two hoofed feet. And since it wore no clothing, the hairy growth on its flanks was free to hang in rough tangles, matted with clots of mud and sticky masses. Hoofed as it was, it was also a biped and walked erect. There were unmistakable hands on the ends of its forelimbs. And with those it scratched busily in the hair of its flanks. Its head was long and narrow. Perhaps once it had been more humanoid, but now it was like some grotesque mask, for the nose was broad and there was very little chin beneath its loose and working lips.

Since it slavered a little, a thread of moisture pended from its mouth and wet the tuft of beard waggling on its chin. Above the very large eyes, horns, much larger and more curved than those Oomark had grown, spread up and back. The skin of its face was yellow-brown. And from its body arose such a stench as made me sick. It regarded me unblinkingly, and—what was worse—it regarded me with manifest intelligence and malignant purpose.

I backed away. The thing continued to scratch and stare. Then it advanced, stumping along as if it had no need to hurry, as if the outcome of any contest was already decided in its favor. And I knew that it was enjoying my fear and disgust.

I dared not turn my back on it to run. I had a feeling that I must face it squarely and that as long as I could do that, I had some small advantage on my side. It was

purposely using the effect it had on me to break my nerve. So I sidled along, swinging the weighted bag in my hand, though that was a pitiful weapon to use against this.

It watched me with a contemptuous satisfaction through strange eyes. They had no dark core or pupil, and they were a full red, like those of the flying things I had earlier passed. As I crept back and it stumped forward, we came into the darker shadow of the mound, and those eyes suddenly blazed with fire, like twin torches in the murk.

Seen so, there was no impression of blindness about them. Though they appeared as opaque ovals of fire, yet it was plain they were still organs of sight.

I continued to back away, just as it relentlessly followed, though it made no move to attack. Then my shoulders struck against one of those turfed rises, and I staggered, struggling to keep my feet. I tried to slip along, one shoulder braced against the mound, with the very small comfort of knowing that side of me protected.

The creature lifted its horned and ill-shaped head and gave voice to a series of grunts. And to my shuddering horror, those were answered from my right, as if another such monster were only waiting there for me to reach it. I stopped, afraid to turn my gaze from those blazing eyes to look.

Once more my adversary grunted and this time was answered by a squawking as two of those flying things I had seen guzzling the fruit flapped down. The thing threw out an arm, and one of the flyers used that as a perch. The other kept to the air, soaring and dipping, its supple neck twisting as if there were no bones in that length, thrusting its head first toward the monster and then leveling, with the neck in a straight line, as if about to aim itself at me.

But that was not the end of the company gathering to hold me at bay. There came a thudding, the pounding of something running, and a black shadow pushed up beside the horned one. It was very large, its spine ridge

equal in height to the first one's shoulder, and it went four-footed. A tail as thin as skin stretched over bones (as might well be, for it was not smooth but knobbed at regular intervals) swung at its haunches. And its head was but a skull covered with skin, with no flesh underneath for padding. It had great dark pits for eyes, and deep in those I could see a flicker of the same fire as in the horned one's. Jaws gaped wide, taking up two-thirds of its head, set with a double row of fangs that were phosphorescent. A great black tongue showed between them. It had small ears set very close to its skull, and in contrast to the hairiness of the horned one, its skin, so tight in places, but sagging in disgusting wrinkles about its bloated paunch, carried no fur at all.

It squatted down on its hindquarters, flanking the horned one. I knew that I could not turn my back on this company, nor even look away from them long enough to see what might lie ahead if I continued to slip along the wall of the mound. To retreat was impossible, nor did I have even the faintest hope of victory if they rushed to bring me down.

What followed was so total a surprise that I jerked back against my support of earth and again nearly overset myself. I heard words, though they meant nothing to me.

"Skark, Skark! Shuck, Shuck!"

The four-footed thing leaped, whirled, and planted its forefeet against the mound opposite me. Its skull-head went back, and from its open jaws came such a sound as might make all hearers shudder.

The horned one also faced in that direction, tilting back its monstrous head to see aloft the better. At the same time it gave a toss to set the winged thing off its perch on the arm into the air; as if signaling it to search out the source of that call.

The hoarse voice was continuing. "Skark, Skark! Shuck, Shuck!"

I was so startled that it took me almost too long to realize their attention was caught by that call and that now I had a slim chance for escape. I reversed my way

and pushed along the side of the mound in the opposite direction to the sound that had warned me. There one of the side paths opened, and into this I slipped, then ran on, keeping some watch on my back trail.

The continued sound of those words, called over and over, drowned out now and then by the baying of the four-footed enemy, somehow reassured me. Could I believe that someone—something—in this maze of horrors had deliberately intervened to save me? Oomark? Yet that voice had not been his. It was deeper, hoarser, no child's cry.

"Skark—Shuck—"

Now that I was away from the immediate vicinity of it, I could not be sure of the direction, save that it was behind. The words echoed among the mounds, now sounding so loudly that I feared some ill chance had brought me circling back to the spot, now so faintly that I could hardly distinguish the separate words, encouraging me to believe I was well away from danger, though I would not allow myself to rely on that.

If I could only get free of the mounds! I stared about me, hoping against very faint hope that I would see something that would suggest I was retracing my original path. However, each way was so like the other that they told me nothing.

A whiff of evil smell was my first guide. I was sure that that was what I had scented at the fruited trees, and it came from a new trail to my left. Since I had no other guide, I might as well surrender to that of my nose.

The stench grew stronger, and I came out at last, not by the trees where I had seen the winged ones eating, but rather at an open space in which there were far more of these growing. They marked each side of an open corridor or road that led to a pool or small lake that was triangular in shape, too even not to be artificial.

Seeing that water, I thirsted, but it was not for me. Water into which fell the fruit of such trees, for I could see the rotted spheres floating in it, would not be fit

to drink. So I turned along the narrow space between the mounds that ringed this area and the tree grove. Soon the trunks and branches made a thick wall between me and the water. The faint echo of the calling had ceased, urging me to a tired trot. If the things had been released from whatever hold the voice had on them, they might be already sniffing out my trail.

It was while I was pushing to my greatest efforts that I came across a trail. Surely those hoof slots in the earth had been made by feet much smaller than that of the nightmare creature and were more like those Oomark would leave. Heartened by that belief, I turned to follow them. But I kept ever on the outlook, listening for hunters. I heard a distant baying, though not such a cry as the one the four-footed thing had given in answer to the call from the mound top. This sound held a note of ghastly triumph, as if it were close to the kill in some chase. I gasped and tried to run faster, wanting to reach the open.

Chance, or perhaps something else, played in my favor, for I stumbled past a mound to see open grassland ahead. Not only that, but again those small hoof marks were deep printed in a patch of uncovered soil. I knew, or thought I did, that Oomark had come this way.

I burst into top speed, putting the sinister collection of mounds behind me, though I feared at any moment to hear, too close, that baying on my trail. When it did not come, I wondered what it had been hunting. The why and wherefore of that opportune intervention I could not guess.

What had moved to my rescue back there? The thought of that shaggy creature who had begged for food and dogged our way suddenly occurred to me. Perhaps it was so intent upon getting its hand paws on the supplies I carried that it would save me from its fellows in order to gain all the loot for itself. That idea was enough to add more speed to my pace.

How long I had wandered in the mound maze, I had no way of telling. In fact, as I considered it now, time within this alien world did not appear to be measured

in any way I understood, though it might be that those periods when the mist closed in and those when it withdrew might parallel the night and day of more normal existence. If so, I would have to face, sooner or later, another indraw time. And past experience warned me of the advisability of finding one of those rings of refuge that Oomark had shown me. But though I searched the ground in every direction as I ran, there were no telltale rises of darker green.

The need for water and for food gripped me. I began to feel such fatigue as I had not known since my too limber toes had drawn sustenance from the ground itself. The bindings around my feet were wearing and loosening. Very soon I would have to improvise substitutes. I had seen no more tracks and had no idea whether I was still following Oomark or not. All in all, my case was a hard one, and I could not keep on going much longer.

It was one of the foot wrappings that settled the matter at last. It flapped loose, caught between my ankles, and sent me sprawling. I lay, jarred by that fall, and then pushed up—to see I must rebind my feet, sacrificing more of my tunic to the business.

I was also certain, as I looked about me, that the mist was closer than it had been when I broke from the mounds. Soon it would shut down completely.

The branch! It had been in my hand when I had fallen. I looked for it quickly. The long stem was snapped in two. But the unfaded leaves and the unwithered flowers were all right. And the grass under my touch was moist, as if the mist was a gentle rain for my refreshment. I laid the branch on the turf and brought out my supplies. So little! It was only the fact I had packed generously when we had left, thinking to share some of the sweets with Oomark and his friends, that gave me as much as I had. I mouthed a single wafer. It was a torment instead of an alleviation of my hunger, making me so avid for the rest that I had to bundle it away in a hurry, lest temptation utterly overwhelm caution.

Making that bite last as long as I could, I unwound the raveled and worn coverings on my feet. I had tried to place my feet on the bag of stone so that they would not touch the ground. But again I had no control over them. Before I could reach for the flowered branch, they wriggled to the turf.

I could not free them then. The toes had turned down, digging into the soil in a way that nailed me fast. I fought fiercely, tearing painfully at my own flesh. Then I was overcome by my body, for once more that energy spread up from my toes. Such a feeling of well-being followed that I surrendered weakly.

But only for a time did I cease the struggle. Perhaps I was able to use my returning strength to good purpose. I picked up the branch, holding it against me breast high, bending my head over it. When I did that, my mind seemed to clear, and I could feel again the resolution that would not yield. To allow my body to command would, some instinct told me, mean the end of me, Kilda c' Rhyn, as I was and had been. And that I would not allow.

So bolstered, I was able to touch my feet with the flowers, then drag my toes from the ground and rest them on the bag of stones. But it frightened me to see, as I rubbed away the sticky earth, that my toes were very dark and even longer and thinner than they had been the last time I looked at them. I hated to touch them, as if they belonged to someone who had contracted a loathsome disease.

I tore at my tunic, a hard task without cutting tools. In the end, I achieved two doubled layers of cloth. Between those I laid, smoothed and flattened, pieces of coverings of the food concentrates, doing all I could to toughen the improvised foot coverings. These I bound on with the greatest care, fearing lest they might come loose and I find myself barefooted on the ground. When they were fastened with the last knots, I tested them gingerly by setting my right foot on the soil. The toes remained quiescent. It would seem I had successfully isolated them.

But all this had taken time, and though I was stronger than when I had fallen, the mist was well closed in. I was averse to wandering blindly through it. I listened, but I could hear nothing. However, the lack of sound was in no way reassuring. And my imagination was very quick to supply me with disturbing suggestions—I could perhaps be visible to the normal inhabitants of this world and might at this moment be the focal point for some stalk.

I curled myself together, the branch once more resting on my knees, where the perfume from it soothed my overwrought nerves. The supply bag was fastened to my belt, my weapon under my hand. I waited, though for what—save disaster—I could not have told.

10

I did not sleep. In fact, I was aware that I had not felt sleepy for some time now—a tiring of the body, yes, but no desire to sleep. But I could not move until the mist lifted, so I had only thoughts to occupy me. I had some small tatter of memory nagging deep in me—perhaps something I had learned in Lazk Volk's storehouse of knowledge.

Lazk Volk—my past on Chalox now appeared so remote that I might have been looking down a long, long corridor to a half-open doorway at the far end. But somehow, remembering him brought my thoughts more into focus. I tried to imagine I was sitting before him, about to report on some study tape, marshaling my words into order, ready to make my points of weight and value.

What were the facts I had discovered? Oomark's aversion to the food I carried, his change, his fear of the flowering branch.

But—I had begun to change also, though I had not eaten as he did. How? Why? I carefully traced memory. I had drunk! On my awakening here I had drunk at the pool. Therefore, I had taken into my body some of the natural products of this world. Then why did the flowering branch bring my skin back to normal? And what of my hair? I tugged loose at least two of my hairs to look.

They were not as green as they had been, I was sure. And some of their curl had returned. The flowers had

done that. Was that why Oomark feared them? Did he know they would halt his alteration, perhaps return him to his old self? But he should want that! I shook my head and recalled the old cry from Volk's computer—"Not enough data."

There was no use speculating over Oomark. I had better confine myself to what I thought, felt, and knew for myself. I could well believe that eating and drinking here resulted in bodily change. The hairy creature—if my premise was correct, then he—it—she—might once have been human! That would explain (somehow I thought of the stranger as male) his frantic attempts to get off-world food, in the hope it would aid him to change back. But the flowers had worked for me—why not for him? Perhaps he had reached an alteration state that prevented their use. I could guess and guess and guess, but I could not be sure of the truth.

I started, my head up, my ears straining to hear. There was something moving in the mist. I watched that faint shadow. Too well I remembered that which had prowled around the ring when Oomark and I had refuged there and what I had encountered among the mounds.

A shape, dark, coming straight toward me! I arose, the weighted bag ready. To run blindly through the mist was useless. It was better to face danger as best I could, but I had little hope if what came for me was of the caliber I had met.

The figure came on slowly, lurching in its walk as if hurt or maimed. Then I could see it as clearly as this stage of the fog allowed. The hairy thing! I swung the bag in warning, and he halted.

There was a torn bandage about his chest that might cover a wound. But—he was changed! At least I did not remember him so manlike. His head was more erect, his shoulders less hunched. Nor did his hair covering appear so dense.

"Friend—" The word was distinct, as audible as if Oomark or Bartare had uttered it. Once more he showed me both hands empty in a gesture of goodwill.

Dare I trust him? If I could find partnership, have a guide through this nightmare countryside, then I could better reach the children, perhaps force a return to the normal world.

"Who are you?" I demanded.

He hesitated, as if not knowing whether to approach, and then shambled on a few steps. I saw that those rags he had twisted about his body bore a dark stain in one place, and I added, almost involuntarily, "You are hurt!"

He cupped one hand over his bandaged wound. "Shuck has fangs." His voice held a tired note.

"Shuck—Skark." I echoed the cries that had drawn the attention of the monsters, allowing my escape. "Did you call so from the mound crest?"

"They must answer to their rightful names. It is the law." He gave me an oblique answer. "That is why they guard their names so well, that they may not be bound by the naming of them."

Perhaps that would have made sense had I known as much as he. But at least this creature must have saved me from what prowled the mounds. So I could not believe, as he stood thus before me, that he meant me any harm.

"What do you want?" Perhaps that sounded cold and hard. Yet I was not ready to welcome so strange a fellow traveler.

"You have—food." He licked at his lips.

"Very little now," I was quick to answer. "And why do you want it? There seems to be plenty here."

"If you eat that, you become part of this world," he said slowly. "You can then have no hope of going back."

"*Is* there a way back?" I seized upon that eagerly. "Where?"

"*They* know, the Great Ones of the Folk. And there are ways they can be tricked into telling. But that I learned too late. I was then—like this. I was tied here. But if you eat true food, then you have a chance of breaking their spells." He pointed to the flowering branch. "You could not handle that if you were one of

them. They fear the notus because it counteracts their power." He staggered, as if he could no longer keep his feet, and went down, his arms outflung to reach to me and what I carried.

Prudence warned me to leave him alone. But in that moment sympathy outargued prudence. I knelt beside him, tugging at his heavy shoulder until I was able to roll him over on his back. His eyes were closed, and he breathed shallowly. The stain on the bandage was dry, so I did not try to shift it to examine the wound beneath, lest I do more mischief than good.

This time I was close enough to see those few rags of clothing were remnants of ordinary fabric, and one scrap had insignia worked upon it. I knew that mark. This scarcely human creature wore a Survey badge!

Survey! To touch that link with the past was a prod into action, strengthening my determination to stand against the menaces of this land. It was a link, indeed, with sane and normal living, though it would appear he who wore it had had little luck in remaining himself.

He stirred, and his deeply sunken eyes opened. I was not even sure he could understand me, but I must know.

"You are Survey—who?" And I think I would have shaken it out of him had he not answered slowly.

"Jorth Kosgro, First-In Scout, Twenty-fifth Division, Argol Sector—"

Only one thing meant much to me now—Argol Sector. If he had operated out of there, he could have come to Dylan. But why? Dylan had been on star maps now for more than a hundred years. And the scouts penetrated far out into the unknown. Unless he had been sent here for some administrative reason, he was very far from where he should be.

"I came from Dylan. How did you reach here?" If he could answer that, perhaps I would have some clue for our return. His talk of those among the Folk who might be tricked into revealing a way did not mean much. I wanted solid facts.

"Jorth Kosgro, First-In Scout, Twenty-fifth Division,

Argol Sector—" His mechanical repetition was exasperating.

I leaned closer. "Jorth Kosgro!"

He stared back up at me, and I had the feeling he did not see me at all. Frustrated, I sat back on my heels. Perhaps it was the effects of his wound, or perhaps he was so changed that his memory of the past was clouded. I wished I had water—perhaps that flung in his face might—

But what had he said? He wanted the food I carried. I opened my supply bag. I had three blocks of choc left and the rest of the package of wafers. And something else—a tube of dewberry jam meant to be squeezed out on the wafers, and one of a meat extract for the same purpose. I chose the meat now as the most sustaining.

Yet I hesitated for a moment before loosing its cap. The supplies were so limited. I would have to take care, or I could not keep normal or help the children. The children—they were my first duty. On the other hand, this stranger knew the dangers here. He had already saved me once, and he might provide our way out. I gave myself such reasons, but among them was also the fact that I could not turn my back upon one who had come to me so, who was basically of my own kind.

I slipped my arm under his shaggy head, lifted him up a little so he rested against my shoulder, and put the end of the tube between his half-open lips, squeezing the soft paste into his mouth. I did not give him much, knowing that it had to be guarded.

I saw him swallow, though that seemed to be a difficult and painful process. Then he moved as one striving to sit up, and I steadied him. He leaned so far forward that I thought him about to fall on his face, but he was holding his middle and his mouth twisted in pain.

"No—matter—" He got out the words in gusty breaths, fighting for control over what racked him. "It will be better—soon."

But the moments he fought that battle seemed very long to me. Finally he straightened up. There was the

glisten of sweat in his facial hair; he brought up one hand to smear it away from his eyes.

Then he looked to the food, and I put out my hand quickly to cover it. He could have so much, but no more.

"You are right." His voice was firmer. "It must not be wasted." Then, turning his head with visible effort, he pointed to the branch.

"Let me—the notus—" Once more his voice was hesitant, and he regarded the flowers almost apprehensively.

What he wanted, I could not tell, save that I knew the change they had wrought in me. Perhaps he hoped for the same result. I bent my head to their scent as I handed them to him.

Only he turned his head away sharply, as if the perfume I found so stimulating was to him a foul stench or acrid fumes.

I could see the great effort he made, forcing himself to hold his head steady, to lean toward the branch and breathe deeply. He gasped, choked, as he expelled that quickly. His hands came up slowly, so I was minded of a man putting out his fingers to grasp a searing coal, nerving himself to the task because some will or duty demanded.

And he took the branch and held it, though he writhed and twisted as if under torture.

"I can—no—longer—" There was a dark bead of blood on his lip where his teeth must have cut flesh. He tossed the branch from him and sat, his shoulders slumped, his whole attitude so desolate that I was moved to ask, "What was it that you hoped?"

"I have gone too far— After I lost my rations, it was eat of their food or starve, though I would not surrender all my will ever!" He sat staring down at his own body, as if he both loathed and feared what he saw. Then he might have faced some fact squarely and won out, for his head came up again and he looked to me, ready to face what lay here and now.

"One does not go forward by looking back." That might have been a quotation. "And to us now the going

forward must matter. Are you old Terran stock?" The change in subject surprised me.

Then I laughed because it was a foolish question. "Who is nowadays, when even where Terra lies is in dispute? My father was of the scouts. He made a planet marriage on Chalox, of which I am issue. How do I know how many hundreds of generations back now Terra lies?"

"Terra unknown? But that is impossible! Why, I have on my ship Terran tapes. I am only fourth generation from First Ship on Nordens."

It was my turn to stare. I had never met, even among all those far rovers who drifted in and out of Lazk Volk's quarters, anyone who had any real contact with Terra. For generations it had been a legend. There were stories it had been destroyed in some galactic war. Those I knew were either a mixture of cross-planetary strains like myself, or could and did, with undue pride, trace their families back to a First Ship. But that ship, in turn, had lifted from one of the crowded inner worlds, not from Terra.

"I have never met anyone who had contact in any way with Terra." I wondered if he were telling me the truth or trying to impress me for some reason.

"It does not matter. What does is that Terra has very ancient legends of a place such as this—" His hand indicated what lay about us. "But then it was a part of Terra."

Now I knew he must be insane, so tormented by his stay here that he babbled nonsense. "This is Dylan!" I retorted. Only of that I could not be sure. It was certainly not the Dylan I had known.

He who called himself Jorth Kosgro shook his head. "You say you came here from Dylan. I know that I came from an unknown planet where I set down my ship. And Terra has legends. The tapes are in my ship now, concerning all this. They tell of a People of the Hills who lived underground and tried to entice mortal men to visit them. If you ate or drank of their food and drink, you were bound to them. Skark—they had leg-

ends of him, too. I have even seen on tridee a very ancient statue of his like. And Shuck—he was said to roam parts of Terra at night, bringing misfortune or death to all who sighted him. All the people had strange powers of mind, so they did things that seemed impossible to mankind. Even the rings of safety, those were sometimes seen on Terran ground. And it was considered ill fortune to step within them, doubly so in any way to destroy them."

His words carried conviction. At least it was evident he believed what he told me. But this could not be Terra—it could not! And I said so.

"Perhaps not Terra, but something else. It may be in another space-time existence, a world that does not obey the laws of matter as we know them—but that at intervals is able to touch one of our planets so there is communication between them for a space. All the legends of Terra were very, very old. And it was true they belonged to an early time when that planet was thinly populated and mankind were few. Such crossings back and forth were far in the past. So it might be that the tie with this world had been severed in some manner and this, or Terra, moved into a new position. Thus when a gate was then opened, it was upon a new world."

"But why do they want to cross, to bring us here?" Things were beginning to make better sense to me. "Bartare— She wanted to come here—she was guided in a way. But why would they want her?"

"Bartare, who is she?"

Keeping my tale as brief as I could, I told him why I had come and how, and that I must find the children.

"A changeling," he said. "It is another tale of the people of the Hills, that for some reason they needed new blood at intervals and must draw upon mankind for recruits. They either enticed adults or tricked them into entering their domain, or they exchanged children with humankind when they were very young, though the latter story might have covered some other activity. It is plain your Bartare knew well what she was hunt-

ing, and she found it here. And—if she is of their blood for sure—" He shook his head. "I do not think you will get her to return willingly."

"Willing or not, she must go back," I said with a determination I secretly wondered I could continue to hold.

"I wonder—" he began, and when he did not continue, I prompted him.

"You have some idea as to where I may find her?"

"Perhaps. Her calling would be the work of a Great One. You would have to go to one of their cities to find out. And since those have their safeguards, those you sought would be warned of your coming. Do not underrate them, Kilda c' Rhyn, for while our kind depend upon machines and the works of men's brains to do their bidding, they have that which is totally alien to our way of thought and our powers, yet it is the more mighty here."

"But you can show me—take me there?" I brushed aside his warning.

"If you wish. It would seem there is little choice in the matter."

What more he might have said was lost, for we heard then, afar off, the horn that had frightened Oomark and me. And this time we had no ring to bring us safety. My companion moved with more speed than I thought he had left. He was on his feet, facing the mist curtain; his two wide and flat nostrils puffed in and out, as if he would use the sense of smell to locate menace.

First he turned in the direction of that sound. And this time I could not deceive myself—it was closer. Then he looked to the right and once more sniffed.

"There lies running water—" He pointed as if he could see it. "If we can reach that, we have a chance."

Why water meant safety, I did not understand. But I must trust one who knew more of this world than I did. So I fastened the supply bag to my belt and caught up the branch and my bag of stones.

He pointed to the branch. "That can slow them. Do you, every time I say 'Now,' turn and brush it across

the ground where we have passed. The hounds will be baffled for a space."

Thus we started on, curtained in the fog. Every time he said "Now!" I turned and swept the ground behind. We could hear the horn calling at intervals, and a yapping answered it. Sometimes it sounded nearer, and then my heart pounded and I felt the cold of fear rise in me. Then, mercifully, it would fade again, though whether that could be some peculiarity of the fog, I did not know. What I did see was that my branch, which had resisted such long handling and usage, being apart from the parent tree, was beginning to fray and lose blossoms. So I feared it would be gone soon. I said as much to Kosgro, but the only comfort he gave me was the hope we could find another of the silvery trees—since they were not rare.

"We are close now—hear?"

Hear I could the gurgle of water. Under our feet was bare gray ground in which white stones glowed dimly. Kosgro went down on one knee to grub out several of these, cupping them in his hands. To my surprise he examined them with care, as if we had all the time in the world to play some childish game. When he had selected nine of them, he waved me on. We slid down a bank, and there was the stream, which was not only a swift-running one, but also one with murky water. I had no liking to wade out into that.

"Here." He took the stones one by one, spat on each, and mumbled something in so low a voice that I could not hear. As each was so treated, he threw it into the water, first near the shore, then each a little beyond, as if he could so make a bridge. When I was about to demand an explanation, I was shocked into silence.

Could I really believe the evidence supplied by my staring eyes? Out of the rippling water, on the very spot where each of those small stones had plopped out of sight, there arose a white block, offering a series of stepping-stones. But it must be all illusion.

"On!" He still held three stones, but with his other hand he gave me a shove to emphasize his order. It

was plain he was willing to trust the blocks. I might have rebelled, only the horn sounded—far too close.

So I crossed to the nearest, sure I would not step on any firm surface but plunge into water. Only there *was* solid footing under my bandaged feet. Thus heartened, I tried the next and the next. I could not see through the mist to the other bank of the river, nor did I know how wide was the expanse so bridged.

I came to the sixth stone—and still water ran before me. Kosgro crowded up beside me and studied for a while before he threw the seventh stone. Then he said, "Wait here, until I can be sure how close we are to the far bank."

He leaped to the seventh stone, and from there he threw the eighth. He was in the fringe of the fog now, and I could not see him clearly. I waited, shivering as the spray from the water being driven against the block on which I stood wet my feet and legs.

"—on—" His call was muffled, but I thought he wanted me to come. So I went to the seventh, the eighth, and finally the last. There still water ran ahead, too much of it. But the mist could not hide Kosgro standing waist-deep, holding with one thick arm to a fallen tree that lay out over that flood. He motioned me to jump so that he could reach me.

Making sure that the bag of stones and that of supplies was securely fast to my belt, I thrust what was left of the branch into the front of my tunic, leaving my hands free. Then I took that final jump.

The force of the current was such I would have been swept from my feet, bowled over and under its surface, if a hairy arm had not caught me. Somehow we both splashed and fought our way out on the bank and lay there gasping.

Again the horn sounded, so close that it must be now on the other side of the river.

"The blocks—they can cross—"

"Look," he told me, and I did so.

There were no blocks, and at least two of them should be visible to me.

"That spell does not hold for long, nor would it hold for any I did not will to use it. There is some advantage in spying on the Folk, you see. I have lurked and skulked and watched them all I could as they go about their lives apart from their strongholds—hoping to learn enough to be able to force my return or to drive some bargain with one of them. They will give me no heed, for I am One Between—neither of the Dark Ones, nor of their company—since I would not surrender to their ways. My only hope has been learning what I could. But at least one of my hard-won scraps has served us well this hour!"

Though I could still hardly believe that he had brought us across the stream in such a strange fashion, I could not deny we were there.

The horn gave a wild, threatening note. I leaped to my feet, ready to run. But Kosgro showed no haste.

"Running water." He pointed to the stream. "That will halt any of the Dark Ones until they find a bridge somewhere, which will bring them over. For a space we are safe from them."

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But we shall not stay here!" No matter how far away such a bridge might be, I wanted to be well away from here, though to move on in the mist also brought problems.

"No." He shook himself, as might an animal, to free his body from water. My clothing clung tightly to me. For the first time I wanted heat, a chance to see the sun and to be warmed by it.

I was willing to let him choose our way, for I had no guide. I might well blunder back to the river in this blindness. He was again sniffing the air, as if he would so smell out our trail.

Then he said, "There is a safe place of the Folk not too far away."

He strode off as one who sees a clear road. I hurried to catch up to him and demand, "How do you know?"

"Can you not smell it?"

I could smell the scent of the bruised flowers I bore, and that was all.

"The Folk use growing things in their spells for doing and undoing. Where they grow, the scent hangs heavy."

"Such as this?" I touched my bedraggled branch.

"No, that is something else. I do not know who planted those. But the Folk do not use them. They are from an earlier time, perhaps another people—"

"Those mounds where these grew—was it once a city or a burial place?"

"It could be either, or both. If any know the history of this world, it is only the Great Ones of the Folk. And they guard their knowledge jealously. There is ever rivalry between them and the Dark Ones. And also some rivalry among themselves. Then, there is something else—" He paused as if he did not want to continue.

But I pressed him, for what I learned, each little scrap, might be an aid toward our return to a world I knew.

"What else?"

"I do not think that the Folk are supreme, though it is true they manage to hold those of the Dark in check. But I have heard enough to know that there is something *they* fear, that they pay a tribute to at intervals. And they pay that tribute in living creatures—which is also one of the reasons why they must recruit from other worlds."

"The children!" Had Bartare been summoned for such a reason? If so, there was all the more need for me to find them—and speedily.

"I do not know." It seemed he did not greatly care.

I had a flare of anger at that, until good sense snuffed it. After all, why should he? The children were nothing to him. And perhaps all that tied him to me was the food I carried. Only—if that were so, why did he simply not knock me out and take it? I had no doubt that his strength and fighting skills were superior to mine, and he could take the supplies with little trouble. Yet from the first he had asked and not forced. And the puzzle he presented continued to plague me.

"The mist is thinning."

I had been too intent upon my own thoughts to notice that until he spoke. But now I could see the circle of vision was, indeed, wider. And moments later we came to a road. This was not merely a turf-grown cut such as that which had led into the place of mounds, but had a pavement of blocks fitted well together. And some of those blocks had the same pale glow as the stones my companion had used to form his strange

bridge. Others were red or yellow or even black. And though they were scattered here and there, with no discernible pattern, yet it was possible to advance along stepping on only one kind if you took time and watched carefully.

"Wait." Kosgro's arm rose as a barrier before me. "This is one of their travel places."

"A road, as I see—"

"More than a road. It does not run to any one place but many. Oh, I cannot explain it, for I do not understand its workings. But I have seen it used. And it works this way—each color of block serves one destination. If you are not careful where you step, it will either not work at all or take you where you do not want to go, for the Dark Ones use it also. Since you seek special persons, choose the glowing blocks. Step only from one to another of those, and with each step hold in your mind the face of the one you would see. Concentrate upon that with all your strength—it will then lead you to him."

"But there are two children—Oomark and Bartare."

He shrugged. "It would seem that you must choose."

Choose? Bartare was with the mysterious Lady who had brought her—and us—here. And since she had come willingly, perhaps she was as safe as anyone might be in this place of many dangers. But Oomark had run off into the unknown. And thinking of the hunt, those I had seen in the place of mounds, I thought I had no choice after all—it must be Oomark, and I told him so.

"As you wish. The glowing stones then, and think of him as you saw him last."

I was surprised, for he spoke as if he had no interest in where I went. Did this mean we parted company here? I asked, and he made a noise that might have been a harsh laugh.

"Leave you? Not while you carry that which is life for me. But one place is as good as another if we can keep out of the reach of the Dark Ones. I still have thin hopes that something more will come of our meeting.

However, since yours is the seeking, you must take the lead here. Only hold my hand, for I have no mind picture to aid me and must depend upon yours."

For a moment I was inclined to refuse, to be free of Jorth Kosgro. My old suspicion stirred. But finally I held out a hand, and he took it in firm grip.

If any one had witnessed our advance on the road, he would have seen an odd sight. In order to step only on the glowing blocks, I wove a very zigzag way, sometimes forward, sometimes, of a necessity, back. I tried to shut from my mind all but Oomark as I had seen him last, running from me because I held the branch.

My back and forth path brought us away from the point where we had first stepped on the pavement. Now I could see, as the mist retreated, that the road ended abruptly only a short distance from where I paused to study the remaining blocks. So far we had gained nothing, and I was ready to abandon this and demand Kosgro strike away—overland.

"Think of the boy!" It might be he read my thoughts and was urging me back to strict concentration.

Obediently I again held Oomark's face in mind and took the last three steps on the pavement, towing Kosgro. Then, I seemed to be running, and yet under me the ground also moved forward, so I needed my own speed to keep on my feet. There was a whirring on either side, a blurr as if our speed befogged the country through which we were passing.

Then I fell, or rather the sensation was that of being tossed from a moving way, so that I struck a hard surface with some force and lay gasping a moment or two before I sat up to see where we were. I heard a groan and looked around.

Kosgro lay a little away, his hands pressed to that bandage about his chest as if he were in pain. Then he struggled up so we sat side by side, able to see where that odd method of travel had deposited us.

There was a wide stretch of green sloping gently down from our landing place. The meadow was the same rich green, but there were none of the darker

rings marked on it. Rather, there were pale flowers, white and cream, and bushes heavy with those golden berries Oomark relished. Around each of these were gathered flying and hopping things.

Not far away moved larger creatures, either eating from the wealth of berries or lying in the grass. Oomark? No. Was that Oomark—or that—or that?

I could see little difference in them from this distance. They all walked on cloven hoofs and were hairy and horned, like the boy. There were only some very slight variations in size when two moved together. I could not tell one from the other. If I called—would Oomark come?

Three seemed to be playing a game, tossing from one to another a ball-shaped object. Another nursed a small animal, petting and smoothing its fur. None wore any scraps of clothing such as Oomark still had about him. But remembering how easily he had disgarded the boots and his upper tunics, I could not count on his not having thrown away the rest of his other-world garments.

"Can you tell him?" Kosgro wanted to know.

"No. I can call—"

"No!" He was emphatic. "It would be wise not to attract any more attention than you must."

"They—they aren't Dark Ones?"

"No, they are of the Folk—lesser beings. But they are full of mischief and would do nothing to help you. Just the opposite. You had better try to locate your boy quietly."

"But they all look alike! Except some seem a little taller than others. It is like expecting me to select a single grain of sand out of a stretch of gravel." I had been counting. There were ten of them, and I could not distinguish differences.

"It poses a problem certainly," Kosgro agreed. "Is there anything to which he was greatly attached, which you could speak of now to attract his attention? If you know of such, we can move closer. You can then mention it and wait for response. The others will seek to

hide him, but your speech might bring some betraying response."

"Bartare? I could speak of her—"

Kosgro shook his head. "She is deep in the affairs of this world by your account. They could know of her. And they could counterfeit a response to baffle us."

"You seem to know a lot about them."

"I do. When I first came here, it was they who stole my food when I was trapped in a bog hole. They ran out of reach, tearing open my bag and scattering what it held. When I managed to get loose, I trailed them, until I learned that anger draws the Dark Ones, too. And I discovered I must control my emotions for a shield. These beings change from one moment to the next, never holding to any course of action for long. I believe they are all children who have been recruited from other worlds over the centuries—"

"Centuries! But they could not live so—"

His head turned so he faced me fully. "Save for the killing the Dark Ones do now and then, there is no death here."

There are races in the galaxy whose life span is infinitely greater than that of my species—the Zacathans, for example. But even they know death in the end. A place with no natural form of death had never been found, though such does exist in the legends and myths of many peoples.

"Do you know what will interest Oomark—a name, something of the sort?" He pulled me back to the matter at hand.

I thought—his mother's name? His father's? I could not be sure. That of some friend on Dylan? Then it came to me—Griffy, over whom he had been so shaken.

"I can try—"

"You will not have very long," he commented. "These can show such speed that we shall not be able to find them again if they run."

I could have done without a warning, which put even more strain on me. They were looking at us now, and I feared they would turn and make off. So I acted

quickly, looking down into the grass as if searching for something and holding out my hand as I called, coaxingly, "Griffy, come! Griffy! Griffy!"

I dared not look up to see if I was making any impression on the group before me. Instead, I added what I hoped would be the crown of my performance.

"Griffy? He *must* be here somewhere! Help me find him—Griffy!"

"Griffy!" I had not called that time. It was a younger, shriller voice. "Griffy, here! Where—where is he?"

One of those hoofed figures burst from among the rest to run toward me. Two others started, as if to head off their fellow. But they swerved aside and ran back as Kosgro tackled the small body, which immediately began to fight. Then the others broke and ran. And they moved with such surprising speed that I knew I could never have caught up with them.

Kosgro mastered his captive with some effort. He was panting as he stood holding Oomark, while the boy's hoofs kicked and tore at the ground.

As I came to them, Oomark shrilled, "Let me go, let me go! You lied! Griffy isn't here. Let me go! I'll call Bartare. She'll get the Lady and make you sorry—very sorry." He was all small boy now. In his fury he had lost that strangeness of speech that had come with his change in appearance.

"I want Bartare, Oomark. If you call her, I shall be most grateful—"

He stopped his struggles so suddenly that I was suspicious. I hoped that Kosgro would be, too, enough not to relax the hold he had on him.

"You don't want to see her. She'll make you awfully sorry—She and the Lady. They know how to do a lot of things to make a person sorry. You'll see!"

"I want to see Bartare. And I think you know where she is. You said you did—you were taking me there."

"That's not my place. I have the free Folk—they're my people now. Let me go with them." He stood quietly and now was ready to plead for freedom rather than fight for it. Only there was a slyness in the gaze he

kept on me, which promised that we had better not trust him. Those in whose company he had been had now vanished from sight.

"Oomark, you're not of this world," I began, and then I saw Kosgro shake his head. I thought I knew he meant that the boy could not be moved by that argument. No, but perhaps anger might work.

"I do not believe you really know where Bartare is. You were only saying that. If you did, you would prove it—"

If he refused to cooperate, I did not know what we could do. We might keep him prisoner, but we could not force him to lead us. Or if he volunteered to do so, we could not be sure that he was leading us right.

"You'll be sorry, very sorry!"

"Very well, I shall be sorry. But still I must see Bartare."

"She is with the Lady. I don't like the Lady. I don't want to go there—"

Perhaps his distaste for Bartare's dream companion was such that no argument might move him. I could only keep on trying.

"You want to be free to go with your friends. Take us to Bartare. Then, if you still wish, you will be. But until you do, we shall keep you with us."

Perhaps enough of the old Oomark still existed in that shaggy body to let him feel the weight of adult authority, and by habit he responded to it.

"All right. Anyway, I won't sorry about you—either of you—after the Lady sees you."

"We'll go now," I said.

Oomark grinned. "Better for me. Then I can see the end of you!" And there was more than childish malice in his tone. As with Bartare earlier, I caught the feeling he had dipped into such knowledge as no child should ever have. That alien part of him was again in command, his human side covered.

He looked up and around at Kosgro. "You can let me go, Between One," he said with the force of an order.

"I shall not run from you. Do you wish me to swear that by Turf and Leaf?"

Kosgro stepped back. "I accept your promise."

"If you *will* come, then let us!" Oomark was all impatience as he started on, looking back at both of us.

We followed. He led, and he held to a pace that made us trot to equal. As we came among the bushes where the berries hung, I heard rude noises. Bits of soft earth mixed with squashed berries came out of nowhere to bespatter us—until Oomark threw up one arm and gave a crowing cry. After that there was nothing, and his fellows, who might have planned to lay an ambush, let us be. When I looked back once, I saw that they had not deserted Oomark, but had fallen into a compact group, trailing us.

That we were moving into one of the great dangers of this world, I did not question. Nor did Kosgro's demeanor in any way lighten that foreboding on my part. He kept glancing from side to side, as if awaiting attack. Oomark's friends had dropped so far to the rear that they were half hidden by the mist.

"How far is it?" I asked at last.

Oomark sent me one of his sly looks. "How far is it? If Bartare does not want you, it can be doubly far." Which made no sense to me, but seemed intelligible to Kosgro, for he stopped short. Oomark turned around.

"What are you waiting for? You want to see Bartare. If you want to see her, come on!"

"Not if you take us by the dale way," Kosgro returned.

Again I did not understand. But I was ready to let him argue since it was apparent he did.

Oomark shifted from one hoof to the other in a dance of impatience. "I would not waste time. Come—or let me go!"

"Not by dale way."

Oomark answered that with a flare of temper. "What do you know of the ways? In ways, out ways, dale ways, straight ways? You're one of the Between. Less than the things that burrow in this!" His kick freed a lump

of soil, which flew to strike Kosgro on the knee. "Betweener!" Oomark hooted, making of that word an insult.

"Not by dale way," Kosgro said for the third time, his tone quiet and unruffled. It held the authority of one who had been obeyed, and expected without question to be so obeyed again.

Oomark's head dropped as if he could no longer meet the other's gaze. He kicked loose another clod, but this did not reach Kosgro if he had intended it to.

"All right!" he cried at last. "I take you the out way!"

"That is better." Again Kosgro's calm reply had its effect. I could see that his winning this point had once more brought Oomark back to more his human self. And with Oomark the boy we could deal better.

He came and held out his hand to Kosgro, who took it, and at the same time offered his other to me. When we were so linked, Oomark started on. But this time he did not trot in a straight line as before, but rather wove in and out through the ankle-high grass. So I was reminded of the way I had stepped from block to block on the road that seemingly went nowhere. Here there was no pattern to be followed.

So we traveled in a weary way, which appeared to lead to no goal, but rather to be some senseless game. Yet since Oomark had only agreed to this under pressure from Kosgro, I knew it had importance.

I was so busy watching the twists and turns of those two that I had little attention for anything else. But at length I saw that the grass was thinning out. There were long stretches of silver sand strewn with flecks of fire, though those flecks were green not red. They grew thicker and thicker until the sand appeared formed of jewel dust.

When there was no longer any grass to be seen, only this gem sand, tall things arose out of the mist. At first I thought them giant trees; then I could see they were pillars of faceted crystal, milk-white or cool green. They were towers with carving on their sides. That is, so they seemed when we were yet a distance from them.

But the closer we came, the less they were like that, being huge worn pillars instead. Still always ahead was the semblance of towers and more towers.

Very close at hand all illusion vanished, and there were many winding ways at the roots of those pillars. To pass along those made the wayfarer feel small and lost.

Even here Oomark did not walk straight, but wound from side to side down one of those ways. Twice he turned completely around, as if starting out again. Yet somehow he brought us deeper into the maze. I grew fearful, thinking we might come upon such as had fronted me in the mounds. Perhaps the mounds had once been like this, but the pillars there had crumbled.

The illusion that this was a city continued to hold, save that it was a city without any inhabitants on its streets, no heads at the windows, no sign that any living beings save ourselves moved here.

In me grew a longing to call out, to learn if we were alone. But there was an awe-inspiring silence. And all I could hear was a whispering from Oomark; he could have been repeating words in a singsong chant. Perhaps he had been doing that since we began this odd method of progression. But I had not been aware of that before.

He halted, so quickly that Kosgro bumped into him, and I, in turn, brought up against the other's broad shoulder. We could see the city ahead, the pillars around us, nothing else. Oomark was grinning again, that unpleasant, unchildlike grimace that was not born of goodwill.

"There is a wall now," he reported.

I could see nothing of the sort. Kosgro dropped my hand, though he retained hold of Oomark, and stretched out his arm. It was very apparent that his fingers flattened against some unseen surface. He felt up and down, exploring it.

Oomark tried to pull away from him. "There is a wall," he repeated. "The way in, the out way, can't take us past it. I've done all I can do. Let me go now!"

"We have not reached Bartare," I pointed out.

He scowled at me, openly hostile. "You can't now. I'm not a Great One. I can't break through that."

"No, you can't," Kosgro agreed. I was dismayed, not only because he agreed, but also because I realized that I had come to depend upon him, perhaps too much, to the threatening of what I must do.

"We can't, but perhaps she can." Kosgro moved a little to let me face that invisible barrier. "Try the notus."

12

I looked to the branch. It was fading fast now, the flowers yellowing, drying up, and the scent was no longer so strong. But as I took it from my belt, Oomark cowered away.

"No!" I think he would have tried to run, only Kosgro caught him.

"Touch the wall," the latter ordered me, restraining the boy.

I felt—my finger touched a smooth surface. It was warm, and my fingertips pricked as they slipped across it, as if some current of energy flowed there.

Then I held out the branch. There was a blast of light, a crackling. Energy might be short-circuited so.

"Yes." Kosgro nodded. "I thought so. That is why they fear the notus—it destroys their power creations. And since they spin the energy from themselves, this may recoil on them now. Let us go on."

Oomark wanted none of that. He had stopped kicking and struggling, but he hung his head sullenly and refused to talk when Kosgro questioned him.

"Can't we just go straight on?" I was impatient.

"I think not. This is one of those places that is overlaid with their illusions. Unless—" Kosgro looked to the branch again. It was shriveled badly, flaking into gray ash when I moved it.

"Are any of the flowers left?" he asked.

I examined it carefully. In the very center were six, withered but still intact.

"Give me three. You take the others," he said. "Rub them across your eyelids."

I hesitated. Sight is very precious. I had no mind to endanger mine, for I remembered only too well how I had fared in the place of blazing geometrical forms.

"If you want to find a road here"—it was his turn to be impatient—"then this is your only chance. I tell you their form of illusion holds too well. We can be entangled and held prisoner by it."

He believed what he said—that I knew. Slowly I raised the crumpled blossoms, closed my eyes, and rubbed the lids with those bruised petals. Held this close to my face, I could still sniff that scent, which, as usual, gave me a feeling of well-being.

I opened my eyes—

There were no tower-pillars about me. I gasped, for it would seem I was back among the mounds where the monsters prowled. About me were heaps of tumbled blocks cloaked with growth of turf and bramble, while the way, which had run straight ahead before, was only a narrow path winding in and out amongst those blocks.

"What do you see?" Kosgro demanded.

I glanced at him, then away quickly—almost ill, dizzy. The hairy figure that I knew wavered, was sometimes this and then that, until I could not be sure of anything about it. Did I see a human man, misty and ill-defined? Or the haired creature? Or even—in flashes—a huge purple triangle?

"Don't!" I held out my hand in appeal, in hope that he might settle down into a stable form.

"What do you see?" Again he asked.

"You—you aren't stable. What—what are you?"

"Not me!" That voice came out of that bewildering swirl of shapes, which flowed from one into another. "What do you see around you?"

"Mounds—ruins." I studied now what did appear to be concrete and fixed.

"There is a road?"

"A small path."

"Then lead us along it—and don't look back!"

I was only too ready to obey. To keep my eyes ahead steadied me, and I began to recover from the panic that had filled me upon witnessing what had happened to Kosgro.

"What do *you* see?" I asked.

"Just as before. I have not used the notus—yet."

Perhaps he was right. Were he to have the double, triple sight of me, of Oomark, it might lead to trouble.

"You have the boy?"

"Yes. What lies ahead?"

I did not quite know why he wanted that information, but I gave it to the best of my ability, describing the crumbling mounds. Yet one was so much like the next, there was very little in the way of landmark. Only the path was trodden, so it seemed in regular use. There were marks like hoof slots, and others not far removed from booted feet. Always I spoke to Kosgro of what I sighted, but he asked no more questions.

This maze of mounds appeared to extend a long distance. Finally Kosgro did break silence.

"What lies ahead?"

"Nothing but more mounds."

"Yet *we* see a taller stand of towers. I think we must be close to the heart of this place."

As if his words turned a key, I did perceive a change, for we passed around a curve in the path and before us was an erection that had suffered less from passing time. No turf greened its sides. The blocks of its walls were naked, and the path we followed led through a massive open gateway in that wall. If it had been dark within that gate, I do not think I would have so readily entered. But beyond streamed light, brighter than anything I had yet seen in this mist-shrouded world.

So we came into what must be the heart of that place. There was no roof overhead. Set about the walls at spaced intervals were rings of silver metal, and those held balls which glowed. These were no stronger than the moonlight of a normal planet, but united, the radiance was considerable.

We stood on a pavement akin to that of the road Kosgro had mastered. It was made up of blocks of various colors of stone, some silver, some green, some crystal. But there were none of black or red as there had been in the road.

The pavement was a square about a platform raised the height of two steps above it. This was all of crystal and emitted a soft light of its own, a thin haze, which, at the four corners, rose in trails as if fires burned there.

On the platform, at its center, a haze gathered and ebbed, then gathered again, to form vague masses, only to disappear, and then reform. To watch that ebb and flow held one's eyes and—

"Kilda!" A jerk at my arm turned me away, and I heard such urgency in Kosgro's voice as brought me aware of him quickly. Nor did I need any more warning. This was a place in which to be ever on guard.

But if his cry had shocked me out of a half-drawn spell, it also caused a change in the weaving mist. That thickened into concrete shapes.

"Bartare!" For the first time since we had left the place of ringing rocks, I saw her. In her, too, there were changes.

Her hair was much longer, covering her to the waist like a cloak, until she swept it back. Her face was thinner, making her eyes appear larger. She stood with hand to chin, her fingers tugging at her lower lip, watching us as one who must make an important decision. And there was a daunting air of assurance about her.

She smiled as if she could read my mind and knew my growing uncertainty, for this was no longer a child over whom I could assert that small shadow of authority I once had.

"So you have come, despite all warnings, Kilda c'Rhyn," she said. Her voice was still high and light, that of a child, yet she was no human child now. "And what have you come to do, Kilda? Wrest us back into that small, small world where I was nobody, nothing?

Do you think I will go—or Oomark—now that he has known what it is to be of the Folk? Has he not asked his freedom? We have broken out of the shells your kind made for us. This body was of your world, yes—" She ran one hand from her breast to her thigh. "But the spirit it houses has come home! And now the body becomes the proper casing for it. We cannot return—nor shall we!"

She had moved out from the center of the platform and now stood close to us, looking down, playing with the long ends of her hair. Still there was in her a portion of the human she had been, even as it came now and then to the surface in Oomark, and I saw that she was enjoying the belief that she was in control here and now.

"We are free!" she repeated. "And you cannot make us unfree, Kilda."

Bartare was the center. If we were ever to return to the sane world, it must be through her.

"Are you free, Bartare?" I chose my words with care. "Who stands behind you—there?" I pointed to the dense pillar of curling mist still occupying the center of the platform.

She lost her half smile and came closer. "Do not call me 'Bartare'! I am not Bartare. I am who I was meant to be. You cannot control me by naming that name."

"And if you are not Bartare, then who are you?" I noted that she eluded my question concerning the other occupant of the platform.

Now she laughed. "Not so will you catch me, Kilda. My name cannot be named by you. I am free of any bonds. You understand, Kilda—I am free!"

"I do not believe it," I returned flatly and boldly.

She stared at me, then for the first time glanced back at the mist. When she returned her attention to me, she laughed once more, but not quite so confidently. Perhaps the use of the notus had heightened my sense of intuition, so I was able to know her unease.

"Ask of *her*"—I pointed to the mist—"if you are free."

It seemed to me that Bartare's Lady must be here. And my words brought about a change in the mist. It thickened and darkened. Finally it was a form, taller than any human, yet humanoid in shape—a woman, as I had guessed, and one who was majestic, awe-inspiring. Her black hair rippled down to her feet, and it was tossed free over her shoulders as Bartare wore hers, though a band of silver set with white stones was about her head. More silver and white stones formed a collar wide and deep across her green gown, a point of which extended in a narrow line between her breasts to unite with a belt at her waist. The green of her robe was that same green Bartare, even in our own world, had favored, and it flowed about her as if she was not clothed in fabric but in some living substance that caressed her body. As with Bartare her black brows formed a bar above her eyes, and her features were clean-carven in a cold beauty that repelled.

I saw her so for an instant, long enough to engrave her in my memory for all time. Then, as with Kosgro, she shimmered and was changed into something else and else and else. So quickly were those alterations that nausea gripped me, yet I could not look away.

Once more Kosgro saved me from the snare of illusion, if illusion it was. He called my name sharply. I started and was able to break the hold her eyes had fastened on mine, to look back to Bartare.

"Ask it of her," I said. "Let her say you are free."

"I do not need to ask." Bartare's voice was heavy with pride. "I am of her kind—her spirit daughter! I am a changeling. Do you know what that means, Kilda? Once your species did know well. I am one of those planted among human kind to learn their ways and draw with me into this world some of their stock. She has given me now the right to show myself truly of the Folk—proving to you also that I am not one to be lightly used. You think me a child, Kilda, to do this and do that as you say. I played that game while I must, to reach the gate. But a child in this world, one of the Folk, is not such as you can lay any command upon.

"Because you—because you—" She hesitated, repeating herself. Once more she glanced to that thing behind her, though I resolutely kept my eyes from following the direction of hers. Whatever she would have said she decided against. Instead, she waved her hand.

"Look you—the Folk and those who are one with them. They are coming to see me prove my right to stand here thus—with this!"

From where she had gotten it, I could not tell, but suddenly she was holding a narrow-bladed sword, not of any metal, but fashioned of wood so newly cut that it had a clean whiteness to it. Using that as a pointer, she flashed it from side to side, calling to our attention the fact that we were no longer alone at the platform. Others had come to stand quietly watching.

Indeed, that was a strange gathering. There were those like Oomark, perhaps of the very group that had trailed us. There were women, slender, with thick green hair waving back and forth on their heads, their skin shining brown, wearing scant coverings of leaves. There were men and women humanoid in appearance, more so than these, and all had black hair and wore green. And there were others, some beautiful, some ugly, with now and then a head or face so grotesque as to seem out of a nightmare. They gathered around three sides of the platform, but facing Bartare there remained only the three of us.

"You have stayed Between, Kilda, as has this sniffing monster who shuffled hither at your bidding. And Oomark." Her eyes turned to her brother, now crouched at my feet. One of his hands held to my breeches, but his head was bent, and he did not raise his eyes.

"Yes, Oomark. I owe him something, for he helped to open the gate—though he did that because I willed and not because he wished to aid me. But it would seem that now he clings to you, Kilda."

I dropped my hand to rest upon the short curled hair now covering the boy's head.

I found words I had not consciously planned to say.

"Because he is not yet entirely lost to what he once was."

"So? If he has chosen, then shall he abide by that choice. Now I shall bind you three to our purposes, and then you shall serve as tribute this time to the Outer Dark. You shall be a lock on that other gate through which have been swept far too many of the true blood. By the power in me—"

"Kilda!" That was Kosgro. "Give me your hand! Give, but do not look at me. Look rather—there!"

As if his words had been a pointing finger to aim my sight, I looked. What he had cast upon the ground were two of the three blossoms of the notus I had given him. They were yellow and limp, but very noticeable.

His hand closed on mine so tightly that it might have brought a cry of pain from me had I not been too aware of something else, for there was a strength in him that was not only of the flesh, but also of the spirit. Something in me answered to that strength and was drawn to it. Had I wished now, I could not have raised my eyes from those two blooms. Oomark crowded against me, clutching at my legs, hiding his face.

"Put your hand on what is left of the branch!" Again Kosgro's order sent me groping for those fragments of stick, leaf, and flower. Part of the small bits left now crumpled into a dry dust upon which my fingers and palm curled and held tightly.

Only dimly was I aware of a chanting in Bartare's child voice. The words were strange. I tried to shut my ears, realizing that to hark was to further the illusion she spun.

So I looked only at the crumpled flowers. And in the punishing grip of Kosgro's hand, I read the effort that held him tense, into which he was pouring all his energy.

Then—the blossoms wavered in my sight, even as had Kosgro and the woman who was not a woman. There were no flowers lying there—but lasers, much like those I had seen many times on my own world.

Kosgro broke grip with me. I watched him stoop and catch up those weapons of another space. One he held in a hand that no longer assumed any other shape. The other he gave, butt foremost, to me. This I gripped, though I had never held such before.

"Stop her!" He made, I thought, to fire at Bartare. But I had another idea and stepped ahead of him to the foot of the platform. I hurled the ashy stuff of the dead flowers straight into the girl's face. Some of it reached its mark. The rest shifted down in a cloud of particles, looking far more than the scant handful I had thrown.

She screamed horribly. The sword-wand fell from her hand, struck the edge of the platform, and broke in two. Bartare swayed, her fingers clawing at her face. Then she took a tottering step or two straight for me and leaned over, her other hand still shielding her eyes, as if to grope for her broken sword. Instead, she fell almost into my arms, and I held her fast.

Beyond her that pillar of mist whirled madly, and I tore my gaze from it. Still holding the girl, now limp in my arms, more of a burden than I could support for long, I backed away. She did not struggle. For that I was thankful. I could not have compelled her had she fought.

"Back!" That was Kosgro. He moved in between me and the others there. His form was stable now, the same hairy humanoid he had always been. He held the laser at firing ready.

The crowd continued to eye us in utter silence. Not one moved in our direction. I could not believe in such continued good fortune. Were they just going to let us walk out with Bartare?

Oomark was still huddled on the ground as I had left him when I had shaken free to attack Bartare. Now he began to crawl on his hands and knees, as if he lacked strength to get to his hoofs. I longed to help him up, but I could not manage both children at once.

There was a flapping in the air. The whirling mass on the platform had sent out a long strip of green to fly at us. I saw the bright flash of the laser cut it

through. And the cut-off portion fell to the pavement. But it did not lie still. Instead, like some evil life form, it wriggled toward us.

Kosgro fired again and split it in two. Now both portions made reptilian advances. Still no one in the company moved. Their faces were impassive. It might be that any quarrel we had with the entity on the platform was none of theirs. For their curious neutrality I rendered thanks, but we dared not build on its holding.

We were under the arch of the wall opening now. And it would seem that, save for those crawling green ribbons, we were to be allowed to retreat unopposed, unless some danger waited outside—

But beyond the gate were only the mounds— Mounds? No! The glitter of the crystal spires evolved from dissolving mounds. That clear sight given me by the notus was wearing off. I cried out.

"What?" Kosgro was quick to ask me.

"I see the towers again."

"We were lucky it lasted as long as it did, but perhaps our luck has run out."

I knew what he meant. Not having clear sight, I might not be able to lead us out again. But if I could not—what of Oomark? He had come to me again and was holding me in the tight finger lock of a terrorized human child, though he wore the guise of the furred creature still. Bartare was limply unconscious.

"I cannot carry her much farther—"

"No. Let me have her." Kosgro took her from my aching arms and swung her over one of his thick shoulders, steadying her there with his left hand. The right still held the laser.

I drew Oomark to his feet. He moved unresisting in my hold. Leaving the rear guard to Kosgro, I swung the boy around and faced him toward a road that seemed to run straight out between those lines of towers.

"Oomark, you must lead us!"

I looked at the palm of the hand that had held the

ashes of the notus. There was a little film of stuff still there. It might help, so I smeared it across my eyes.

What I faced now was a wavering world, first one thing and then another. It took all the strength of will and purpose I could muster to keep my eyes open and not shut them to that sickening mingling of changing forms. I steered Oomark with one hand on his shoulder toward the road I saw only in bits. He began to walk, staring straight ahead, as if he had no will of his own but moved by mine only.

I saw enough to use my laser. A green thing had curled out to entangle our feet, and a second snapped out of one of the mounds. Both times the things I fired at were parted but not destroyed, the sections wriggling after us.

"Do they follow?" I called to Kosgro.

"No."

A small part of my mind wondered at that. But I concentrated mainly on our road.

In and out we went, while about us tower became mound, mound tower. But once more the tower part became more solid and lasted longer, and I guessed that the dust was now failing me also.

However, Oomark kept moving, even when once more I saw only the illusions, and we had to pin our escape hopes on him. He had not spoken since we had passed the unseen barrier coming in, and he moved now in what seemed to me a trancelike state.

Whether we were following the same road we had come, I did not know. The need to be free of this place was so great that I would have run if I could. But Oomark could not be urged to a faster pace, nor could Kosgro keep to it carrying the burden of Bartare.

Then came a moment when the laser vanished from my hand. I heard an exclamation from Kosgro and guessed that his weapon was also gone. Like the other gifts of the notus, the weapons had only been loaned us for a space. But at least they had started us on our escape. Now I looked to either side fearfully, dreading to see one of those green ribbons in ambush.

That journey seemed to go on forever. Fear chilled me. Yet the emotion was a goad to keep me moving. And Oomark marched so determinedly that I held to the hope he would bring us free. In the end he did, out into the open country.

I threw myself on my knees and pulled him to me, holding him close in thankful embrace. Then I looked to Kosgro.

"We made it—we're safe!"

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He shook his shaggy head. "Far from it. In fact, we have moved into greater danger."

Such was his tone that I felt frozen, as if an ice wind had curled lash-wise about me.

"But we are out of that city!" I protested.

He shifted Bartare's limp form on his shoulder. "Do you not remember what she said about our being intended as a tribute to the Outer Dark?"

"And what does that mean?"

"If what I think, it is serious. The Folk are not supreme here, though they try to boast that they are. Two ways war in this world, and the Dark Ones take their toll. I have heard it whispered that even the Great Ones of the Folk pay a price to keep what they rule. And I think they have marked us for that price."

"If—if we can get back—"

"Yes, our only hope is escape to our own world. And these two children opened a gate once. We must hold to the very thin hope that we can learn from them how to return. But we must not linger here."

"Where then?"

"Where there is neither dark nor light, as known to these people—a natural ground."

"That being?" It seemed to me that our chances were shrinking fast.

"There are such places, marked by the growth of notus. Both influences avoid those."

"Where do we find one?"

"That is it. I cannot be sure. But to keep moving is one small defense. If we hesitate in any one place, we may be the prey of either light or dark."

I could have raged aloud with anger now. He had dashed my hopes, to give me little in return. To blunder across this haunted land, I thought, was the plan of a madman.

He might well have read my mind at that moment for now he said, "I give you the truth, for to hide the worst is to spread perhaps another net for our trapping. We shall be hunted as perhaps few have been before, and we can depend on none other than ourselves. But the sooner we leave here, the better."

He did not even wait to see if I followed. Settling Bartare against his shoulder, he started off into the mist. Seeing no other way, I took Oomark's hand and trailed behind. Luckily the boy did not dispute my hold nor refuse to go, though he still moved in a daze.

We recrossed the expanse of emerald sand and then passed onto the turf. But always the mist held, and I did not see how Kosgro could be sure we were not wandering in a circle that would eventually bring us back to the very site we fled. He did not run, but kept to a walk that Oomark and I could match easily. Now when we were out of the worst pressure of fear and need, I felt hunger, and I knew we could not go on much longer without rest and food.

The even spread of turf began to be broken by a growth of bushes. Finally Oomark tugged loose from me and sprinted to one loaded with the golden berries. When I would have run after him, Kosgro stopped me.

"Let him be. He will eat whether you try to keep him from that food or not. We must save the other world food for us—"

So heartless did that sound to me that I turned on him in surprise and anger. Doubtless he read it in my face.

"It is so. The children will not eat your supplies now. To force that upon them will waste it, for their bodies will reject such food. But we need the strength it will

give us. If we surrender and eat here, then we are dead to what we have always been. Do you want that, Kilda?"

Perhaps his logic made good sense. But I rebelled against it, as might Oomark against the food I wanted him to have. Kosgro laid Bartare on the grass and squatted down on his heels beside her. I hesitated. I wanted to go to Oomark, fast stripping the berries from the branches, spattering himself with their juice as he crammed them into his mouth.

Only, watching him eat, I knew Kosgro was again right. I would not be able to control the boy. And manifestly Kosgro would give me no aid. So I sat down and leaned over Bartare, for the first time wondering at her condition, she lay so still.

Under my questing hand her heart beat steadily, and from all appearances she might have been peacefully asleep.

"Bartare!" I laid my hand on her shoulder. Kosgro's fingers closed about my wrist, drawing it away.

"Better leave her so. If she wakes, she may not be willing to go with us, and we cannot battle with her—"

"But—what is the matter with her?"

"The notus shocked her. I have seen it happen so. It does not last. But in this land all men or things fear lack of consciousness, because then what they hate may creep upon them unseen."

I had to accept his words, though I chafed inwardly at depending so much upon this stranger. However, again his logic made sense, for if Bartare was hostile (and we had good reason to believe she would be), then, indeed, she could hamper our journey.

"We need food." Kosgro broke bluntly into my thoughts.

Again I wondered a little at his forebearance. Long ago he might have wrested the food from me, even taken it to leave me adrift here. But he had not done so, and he asked instead of taking. By so little was

I assured that I could depend upon him.

I opened the bag and surveyed the pitiful remains of our supplies. A wafer between us? Or a square of choc broken in two?

But he was continuing, "We must have more than before—"

"No!" I held both hands to guard my store. "There is so little—it will not last!"

"True. But neither shall we if we do not get the strength it will give us. And we need our full strength now."

I was still unwilling. And I watched Oomark longingly. To have food about and deny it to one's starving body was double pain. How long before we would be reduced to what grew here?

"We must have strength to go on," Kosgro repeated.

My hand shook a little as I brought two wafers out of their wrapping and held one out to him. He ate it as I did, making each small bite last as long as possible. And so that we might not be tempted further, I once more rolled up the bag and made it fast to my belt.

Oomark returned, wiping his sticky hands across his flanks, his tongue licking his chin where juice had dribbled. He looked down at Bartare and then to me, and he was alert now, with much of the old slyness back in his eyes.

"The Lady wants her. She'll come for her," he remarked.

Such was the effect of his certainty that I half turned, expecting to see trouble close at our backs.

"That shall be as it shall be." Kosgro stood up and stooped to pick up Bartare. "Best be getting on—"

"Where?" Oomark asked. "We'll be meat for the hunters at the next indraw of the mist."

Kosgro looked at the boy as intently as if searching out in him some answer to an unasked question. And then he said, speaking to Oomark as he would to an equal, "Where would you shelter from the hunters?"

I thought Oomark was surprised. But now there was more of the human to be seen in his small face.

"There is only one place—if we can find it."

Kosgro nodded. They shared some special knowledge, shutting me out. And that I would not have.

"If you know—both know—then where?"

"Where the notus grows," Oomark returned, but still he looked to Kosgro.

"But I thought—" I remembered how he had raced away from me when I had taken up the branch, as if what I held then was deadly.

"There is safety, from the Dark Ones, from the Lady." But I saw him shiver as if such safety would be hard bought.

"It is safe," Kosgro repeated in a way that made me think of a promise given. Since they would so shut me out, my irritation grew, and now I demanded loudly, as if to shake them out of that unity, "Where do we find it? Is it close?"

"We search," Kosgro replied. "And we hope that we are favored by whatever fortune remains to us in this world. We can scent it—"

He turned as if to go. I reached for Oomark's hand that we might walk as we had before. But he eluded me, to forge ahead of Kosgro. Since they appeared to believe that scent alone could win us safety, I, too, began drawing deep lungfuls of air in search of that fragrance.

Though we plodded steadily ahead, I could pick up nothing to aid us. My impatience and bitterness grew stronger. I was sure this was a fool's quest, depending far too much on chance, and yet I had nothing to offer in its place.

Turf grew only in patches now, and there were fingers of rock rising higher through the green. It was gray, and on it the mist left runnels of moisture, which I began to regard longingly, running my tongue over dry lips and remembering more and more the fine feeling of water in one's mouth.

Then there loomed out of the veiling about us a rock

that was different, for in some distant past this had been shaped by hands. Nature could not have left it so. It was a pillar, squared. And down its foreface, so deeply carven that even erosion had left enough pits and lines to be read, were characters. But these were of no language I knew, nor had I ever seen the like even in Lazk Volk's collection of long dead galactic tongues. On the left face of the column, partly turned toward us, was a figure in half-relief. On the face, if it had ever had such, the features were worn away. Only the roundness of the head and the length of a humanoid body, though that body was also equipped with mantling wings, remained.

It had been carved to lean forward, gazing down at its own feet or else the foot of the pillar. There rankly tall dark green grass grew, such as that which formed the rings of shelter.

Kosgro halted. With one hand he pointed to the grass.

"A guide, if it will work for us."

"A guide—but how—?" I did not finish, for he was continuing.

"Get a clump of that, Kilda, a fair-sized one."

Though I could not see the purpose, I went to the foot of the column, gathered a bunch of the grass in my hand, and pulled as hard as I could to free it from the soil. But it did not give way. Instead, the resisting blades cut my flesh, making me let go and cry out in surprise.

"Not that way!" Oomark came running. "You do not take—you ask. And if there is a will in our favor, it will come."

He shouldered me to one side and looked up into the featureless ball of a head.

"Give me your hand." He did not wait for me to raise it—he grabbed it. And before I could protest, he smeared the open palm, where blood had gathered in those cuts, across the stone breast of the carving.

"Paid in blood!" he cried. "Paid in blood! Now pay in kind, by old bargains—let this be so as we ask it!"

So did he influence me, I half expected that ball of a head to show us an open mouth, speak, either agreeing or denying. But there was no such happening. And, Oomark, having loosened his hold on my wrist, allowed my hand to slip away from the rock, leaving dark smears behind.

"Now pull," he told me.

I was nursing my wounds. "I have open cuts—you do it."

"I can't. You paid the price, not I. If the bargain is made, it is with you alone."

He did not explain, only stepped away, leaving the action to me. Once more I started to grasp the grass, this time with the other hand.

"No!" Again Oomark halted me. "With your right hand, or else it is no true bargain."

I winced as I bent my cut fingers around the grass. I did not jerk at it now as I had before, but tried a slower pull. After a long moment of effort, it yielded. The roots were not fine and threadlike, but rather the whole bunch I had plucked grew from a single gnarled and thick length, which came forth from the ground with a shrill squeak of protest. I sat back on my heels waiting for Kosgro to tell me what he wanted done with this treasure.

"That has power of a sort. If any notus grows near here, it will point the way. Hold it loosely, keeping just enough control so it will not slip from your grasp. As we go, it will tell us the way."

Since this was all of a piece with the other alien matters of this world, I made no protest. I got to my feet, and as we went on, I held that bunch of grass with its stiff, much curved root a little away from my body.

"Indraw comes soon." Oomark walked between us, as if he had good reason to want protection. He was right. We were fast entering into one of those periods when our way would be too hidden to follow.

But at that same moment the tuft of grass and root in my hand turned to the right. And though I strove against it, it stubbornly resisted and continued to point

so. I called their attention to it and heard a sigh of relief from Kosgro.

"The indraw—" Oomark reached up to catch at one of those rags of uniform that still clung to Kosgro's body. "We cannot keep on."

"We have no choice, I think," the other answered.

I saw that now he hunched even more under Bartare's weight, and he pressed one hand to the bandage lapping his chest, as if his wound troubled him.

"The notus may be far off—" Oomark protested.

"Stand where you are," Kosgro told me. He then put out his hand to the root, testing its rigidity, jerking his fingers away quickly and rubbing them up and down his thigh.

"I don't think so. In any event, we shall have to risk it. There is no possible shelter here."

We had come to a place of many rocks, which I did not like the look of in the least. Here ambush would be easy, and my imagination stationed some enemy behind each we passed. Oomark might want to hide here, but to me it did not offer safe cover.

The grass root shook and altered direction in my hand as I made detours around these boulders. It was necessary to go slowly as the footing was bad, consisting of small rolling stones and places where one could trip.

During our travels those bandages I had set around my feet were wearing through fast, and I knew that unless I was able to renew them soon, I would be left barefoot—a condition I dreaded, so that I pushed forward at times with reckless speed until some muttered warning from Kosgro slowed me.

The indrawing of the mist was almost complete and so slowed even more our going. We did not hear any warning horn this time. The presence of a lurking menace came to us first by a breath of air carrying a sour stench, strong enough to make me gag.

Yet Kosgro drew in a deep, testing noseful of the effluvium. He had paused, even as I, and now used both

hands to adjust the lie of his living burden. I saw Bartare's face, her closed eyes, her slow, even breathing.

Unfortunately, the root pointed us directly to the source of that foul odor. I clung to a rock support and glanced at Kosgro. Did he know what lay ahead? Was it something we dared face?

He might be measuring odds. Twice he sniffed deeply. Oomark crouched between us, once more seeking the protection we could afford his small person.

At last Kosgro shrugged. "We have no choice. Sooner or later it will detect us, even as we do it. Then we have no chance of escape."

"What is it?"

"One of the fell-worms, I think. But that does not greatly matter—all of the Dark Ones stink in some manner. That is one of the safeguards the Folk have, since ofttimes they do not seem to know that they so betray themselves to those they would hunt. On it is—"

I wanted to refuse, to stay where I was, for the stone under my hand seemed now an anchor to safety. But as always, I must depend upon his superior knowledge.

With the root pointing, I squeezed between rocks and went on. The loathsome smell grew stronger. But though I listened with all my might, I could hear nothing moving. My other hand went to the weighted stone bag I carried still, slung at my belt. Could I use that if I were suddenly confronted by some monster? I freed it, ready to swing.

The reek of vile corruption tortured my nose. I wanted to cough, but I dared not. Oomark had both hands pressed to his nose and was breathing through his mouth.

There was a swirl in the mist. It was plain that something now moved there. Fingers caught at my shoulder. I was slammed painfully against another of the tall rocks. Then Bartare was shoved into my arms, and Kosgro twisted the weighted bag from my hold. He moved out before us, swinging it as if to test the weight

and balance of that poor weapon. Oomark crept up beside me.

The movement in the mist had a dark core. But so thick was the indraw that if we waited to see what crept there, it might be far too close. I did not need any warning from the others to freeze into immobility, wishing I could deaden the beating of my heart, the sound of my breathing. It seemed to me both of those were alerts to pull the thing down upon us.

That darker spot in the fog grew more defined. It neared the edge of the curtain. Then there broke through a narrow black wedge, aimed at Kosgro like the spearpoint of a weapon. For a second or two I thought it just that.

Then it was too close to mistake. The thing was ringed, and between those ridges of gristle it contracted and expanded. This was no weapon, but part of a living thing, though I could not detect eyes, moth, nose—saw nothing but the black flesh.

It hovered so for an instant or two, and then it darted at Kosgro. He swung the bag against the side of that cone-shaped head with such force that it bore the cone before it against a rock to our left, smashing it between the stones in the bag and the unyielding surface of a boulder.

There was no sound, but a thick, viscid stuff spurted out. Then, in a wild lashing, the whole of the terrible body was upon us, writhing and whip-flailing. Kosgro struck and struck again, though never with the same luck as the first blow. Twice it had its loops around him in crushing force. Yet, as its battered head flopped about limply, he was able to tear himself free.

I could do nothing to help him, and I feared. The thing was perhaps three times his height in length, and his blows seemed to rebound, leaving no sign of wound behind.

Mostly he battered his head. Once or twice I thought him finished when those loops encircled and tried to drag him from his feet. And I could see he was tiring.

If he had given it its death blow with his first lucky attack, it was a long time dying.

Twice more I saw him allow the coils to take him as he concentrated on the oozing head. Then that fell to the earth, to lie still, though the rest of the worm coiled and uncoiled. He turned to look at me. And there was that in his face which made me push Bartare against the rock and look about wildly for some weapon.

Only stones! I pushed the guide root into the front of my tunic and caught up one so heavy that it needed both my hands to lift it as high as my knees. Gripping this, I somehow covered the ground and brought my burden down on the active length of the worm. It landed squarely, though I had had no time to aim. By some chance of fortune it must have hit a sensitive spot, for the coil still holding Kosgro gave a convulsive shudder and loosened so that he could pull free and jump over it to safety before it knotted again.

He scrambled to catch me and pushed me back just in time, for the flopping became frenzied. It beat the ground and the rocks in a wild lashing of the unmarked end of its body. I could hear Kosgro's heavy breathing through the thud-thud.

"We—must—get—up—" He steered me back to the children. Then, bespattered with the thing's blood, reeking with its awful stench, he stooped to lift the girl.

"Up!" His eyes blazed, as if by the very force of that uttering he could lift us all.

I caught at Oomark, who was already scrabbling at the surface of a boulder, trying to find some toe—or hoof—hold as an aid to climbing. I raised the boy until he could catch at the top. Then, somehow hardly knowing how I did it, I was beside him.

There was a range of ledges ladder-wise beyond, and Oomark was already seeking the next. I turned and was able to lift Bartare as Kosgro supported her from below. Then he joined me.

The rest of that wild climb remains a blur in my memory. That we made it was as great a stroke of good

fortune as Kosgro's first blow in that battle. But that struggle had taken its toll of him. He tried, even with my help, to raise Bartare to his shoulder and failed. So we somehow got her along between us until we reached a site well above the level where we had met the worm.

Below, now hidden in the mist, we could hear the continuing struggles of the creature. It would seem far from dead. And Kosgro said, between gasping breaths, which seemed to hurt him, "Must—get—on— It will be—heard—draw—hunters—"

On we went, slipping, pulling at one another and at Bartare, who continued as if asleep in her own bed, until something within me wanted to slap her awake, so I had to set controls on my exasperation.

Finally Kosgro collapsed and half sat, half lay, on a ledge that was wide enough to give us a perch. We could not see below, above, or even far along that. He seemed to be content to lie, breathing heavily. And I, in little better case, crouched beside him. Oomark huddled just within our range of vision, his head turning from right to left, as if he listened with terrible urgency.

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The thrashing of the worm was a distant drumbeat. But there were now other sounds. That world, which when the mist drew in had always seemed so locked in silence, now resounded, though I thought all such noises came from safely below our perch. I could not identify them, nor did I want to.

Oomark moved closer. "First came the small, now the larger. Soon they will finish the worm, and then they may follow us—"

"True," Kosgro agreed. "Time for us to move." He eyed Bartare and once more felt, with a delicate touch, his bandaged side.

"Your hurt—it should be tended."

"Later. We have no time now," he told me with authority. "But it is true I may not be able to carry her for long."

"How far yet?" Oomark demanded. "Look to the root, Kilda. How far?"

I had forgotten our strange guide. Now I brought it out. Once in my hand, it snapped to a point along the ledge. Kosgro touched it with a fingertip.

"Rigid enough. We cannot be too far away. And while I can, I shall carry her."

As if heartened by what he had read in the root, he arose and let me help hoist Bartare into her old position across his shoulder. Then once more we set out along the ledge. I needed no warning for caution. I was only too aware of those sounds. And I could guess what

might happen were we to attract attention of those who feasted there. We had been overwhelmingly lucky in our meeting with the fell-worm. We could not possibly hope for such good fortune a second time.

The ledge grew narrower, and I began to wonder how we could manage if we had to climb or descend the cliff wall. With Bartare a deadweight, I doubted if we could make it.

But fortune once more smiled, for when the ledge did end, it was in a series of projections like the steps of a giant stair leading up, and these we could manage.

It was a hard pull, and once more we collapsed, panting and gasping, at the top. At the summit the root turned in my hand, pointing down at an angle to say we were above our hoped-for refuge. So close were the mist walls about us that I feared any advance in this blinding fog might send one or all of us falling over some unseen edge.

"Down, eh?" Kosgro hunched above Bartare, looking to the root. "But if that is our road, we cannot take it—yet." He sighed as one who has made a great effort to little purpose.

"Also," he continued after a moment, in which I had time to realize just how great the danger was, "there is the matter of food—"

Food! I clutched tightly that bundle. But I could not deny I was hungry. Hardly any of my longing had been assuaged during that mockery of a meal we had shared by the berry bush. If the very thought of food made me faint, how much worse it must be for Kosgro, who had not only carried Bartare, but also had expended so much energy in fighting the fell-worm.

Reluctantly I unwrapped the supplies and knew once more the chill of viewing so little. Once this was gone, our last hope of remaining in part ourselves would be reft from us.

I smeared protein paste on wafers and kept the smaller portion. And to the larger I added a choc cube for Kosgro. He did not demure accepting the larger share. Good sense dictated such a division.

Mouthing my wafer, I quickly rewrapped the food, hiding it from sight and temptation. Then I began the rebandaging of my feet. More of my tunic must be sacrificed to that effort.

I winced when I looked at them, so alien had they become. The toes were abnormally long—like—like roots! Rooted feet, shining, hardened skin like bark, green hair—I put my hand to my mouth and I did not cry out, but still I shuddered as I hurried to wrap those feet, trying not to think.

Suppose I had obeyed the impulse that had ridden me to throw aside the wrapping and burrow with my toe roots into the soil? Would such action have led to my becoming a shrub, a tree, something firm fixed in this world for all time? I must be careful that did not happen, that I did not allow my toes to touch ground.

Oomark had been walking up and down. Now he came clattering over the stone.

"We must go! There are many Dark Ones below, more coming!"

Kosgro sighed again. "He is right. At the indraw they hunger the most. The worm will not be enough."

I picked up the root, hoping that it might have in some way modified its signal. But it still pointed down.

"Where do we go? If we follow this, we must return."

"And that we can't!" Kosgro flexed his arms. "We shall have to move along this level as long as we can and hope for some small favor from fortune."

Once more he carried Bartare. But now our pace was a crawl with frequent stops for rest. Then the root made a sudden shift in my hand. I stopped to display the backward shift to my companions.

"We have passed the place."

Kosgro laid down the girl. Together we went to our knees and crept to the left very slowly and cautiously, hoping to come to the lip of the heights on which we stood and so gauge what lay below. Then, just as the stench of the fell-worm had been a warning, so now a wave of that invigorating fragrance of notus was a

promise of hope. Kosgro exclaimed, his slit mouth stretched in a grotesque parody of a human smile.

"It does not sicken me this time!"

"What does not?"

"The notus scent! I can stand it."He pounded one big hairy fist on the stone. "Don't you understand? The food has helped. I am now less a part of this world. The notus does not warn me off!"

I could understand his exultation, for I had felt it when my skin had softened as I picked up that earlier branch. Together we lay, shoulders touching, trying to see below the rim of rock. But so heavy was the indraw, there was little we were sure of. The trees we sought could be very far or near, but still well hidden.

As my root toes had drawn some form of energy from the soil, so did now the scent bring me another. The hunger that had been a cramping pain in my middle was gone. I felt at peace and, not only at peace, but also as if there was nothing I could not accomplish—that I could command fate and make it subject to my will.

"It does not seem too difficult a descent," I said. What we could see of the rock was broken and pitted to offer hand and footholds.

"Where we can see," Kosgro agreed, but he added, "It is what we cannot see we must fear. If we had a rope, any form of climbing aid, we might—"

Was he going to give up! Astounded, I levered myself to a sitting position. "But we must go down!"

"I agree. But tell me how."

A moment of sober thinking told me he was right. Three of us might well make it. But with Bartare there was no chance—not for all of us. Already I was facing the only solution. I alone had the ability to handle notus without discomfort. That a branch was a powerful aid here had been proven. And we must have that aid to survive. Therefore, I must make the descent, get a fresh branch, and return with it.

I said so and prepared for some protest from Kosgro.

He was silent for a long moment, then said, "I suppose that is the only way."

"You sound doubtful."

"I cannot help but be so. We do not know what lies below, even if the rock is climbable beyond the short distance we can view. To go down into the unknown is perilous, and you are the least well prepared to face such dangers."

"From what we can smell, there must be more than one notus tree in bloom. And how many of the dangers of this world can approach such? Or am I wrong in believing it a cure for many of the local ills?"

"No. And you are right that you alone may be able to handle it. I can only say keep your wits and senses alert and take all possible care."

After what we had been through, I needed no such warning. Once more I checked the coverings on my feet to be sure the bindings were tight. And before I slid over the rim, I did something else. I untied the food bag, thus giving him the greatest trust I had. He did not move to touch it; rather he looked at me searchingly and said, his words very sharp and clear, "If you expect ill fortune, then do not go. There is something in the very air here that can pick up and enlarge on any lack of confidence, forcing upon one the very fate he would avoid."

I forced a laugh, hoping I did not show his words had shaken me. "So you think I believe myself ready for disaster? But you are wrong. It is just that I do not wish this bumping against me. Now I lay upon you a dire warning in return—it may be that our lives rest upon that bundle."

He nodded. "Do you think I do not already know that? Be sure it will be well guarded."

I did not look up again as I swung over, but kept my full attention for the rock wall with its many useful breaks. In spite of the tight binding, my feet were more supple and able to search for holds and cracks than they would have been in boots. But I inched along, testing each hold before I used it as an anchor.

My world narrowed to that strip of wall, water-slimed by the concentration of the mist. The secret was, I quickly decided, to live in the present moment only. Thus I clung and hunted for holds, clung and hunted, and each time I changed position won a little farther. The fragrance of the notus grew stronger, heartening me, when I dared to think about it—to the belief that the tree or trees could not be too far away.

At last my feet touched a surface, and I held on, still facing the wall, not yet daring to turn, while I slid first one and then the other back and forth, to make sure I had firm footing. I kept one handhold and very slowly edged to face outward.

There was solid stone under my feet, running out level into the mist. And a green rim of turf was there, too. I hesitated before moving out, for I was not sure I could return to this same spot. But the notus could not be too far away, and hesitation solved nothing.

I began counting my paces aloud, hoping thus to have some clue for a back trail. So I reached the turf, which was soft and springy underfoot. And I stooped and tore a portion loose, though the tough growth resisted, so that I was able to leave a mark. I continued ahead, leaving gashes behind me every five paces.

Thus I reached the first of the notus trees. There was more than one—in fact, a small grove of them. And I stood breathing deeply, rejoicing in the feeling of headiness and well-being.

The blossoms hung in thick clusters, but they were not the clear white of those of the first branch. Some were gold-tipped at the edge. And others detached, to drift groundward, where there was already a rich shifting of them on the turf.

I walked carefully under the nearest tree, looking up, determined to select the freshest of the branches, for it would seem that the flowers were now past their bloom peak and in the last stages of their life.

Having made my choice, I raised my hands to wrest that branch free. But when my fingers touched it, it was snapped up out of reach, as if the tree realized

what I would do and was resisting. That startled me into jumping back, for I had an odd idea it might lash back at me in return.

Was this another case similar to the tuft of grass? Must I give some sort of weird payment in return? I examined the cuts on my hand. They still smarted, but they no longer bled. I drew a deep breath and went to the trunk of the tree, putting my torn and grimed hand flat against that shining silver surface.

Why I should do this, I do not know, but it somehow seemed right. And I spoke to the notus as if it were a fellow being who might conceivably be stirred to aid were it to understand our deep need. I asked of the tree whatever it would give me, saying that I would not try to take if it refused, for I remembered now how that first branch had been borne to me by the wind, that I had not reft it from its setting.

Over me the ribbon-narrow leaves rustled, and the bunches of flowers tossed. That movement had not come from any wind, but it passed on to the next tree, and the next, growing louder and louder.

About me fell in a shower those blossoms now fading, dislodged by the tossing. They caught in my hair, in the folds of my under tunic, clung to my arms and shoulders as if their petals had adhesive coating.

There was a sharp split somewhere over my head. When I leaned back, my hands still on the tree bole, to see what had happened, a branch fell with odd precision across my two arms. It was Y shaped, with a cluster of flowers crowning each arm. And, to my delight, these were not as well developed as those being shed, so they might be expected to last for some time.

I spoke again, giving my thanks to whatever power had brought me this gift, being awed and moved by the response to my plea, ashamed of my greedy action in trying to break off my choice earlier. Under the palms of my hands the bole seemed to be sweating, or else moisture condensed there. I longed to lay my lips to that, to lick into my dry mouth the heavy glistening beads. So great was that longing that it tempted me

past prudence, and I did embrace the trunk and set my lips to it.

The moisture was not water—it was too sweet. But it brought warmth and a feeling of good and hope. Also, though it was not a full drink such as I was used to, it refreshed me greatly. As I started away from the tree, I again gave thanks. Nor did it seem strange to me to do so, for the notus was plainly not just a tree—though what it was I did not know.

With the branch safely tucked into my belt, I went back to the cliff. The climb was not as bad as the descent, for now it was easier to look up to the holds, and secondly, the moisture had refreshed me, readied me for more exertion.

The blossoms that had fallen on me still clung to my skin. Nor did I want to brush them off, for their scent and the soft touch of them on my flesh were good.

Just as the climb was less demanding than the descent, so did it take me a shorter time, for which I was glad. And when I pulled up and over the rim, I was eagerly trying to devise some method by which we could all descend to the grove. I looked upon that as the ideal haven for rest and refreshment.

The indraw was beginning to lighten as I reached the top. Bartare lay there, apparently as deeply asleep as ever. Oomark squatted some distance away, as if playing sentinel. Kosgro sat by the girl, his shoulders hunched, his hands dangling between his knees, his attitude one of exhaustion.

He lifted his head as I waved the branch triumphantly in the air.

"We must get down somehow," I told him. "There is a whole grove of notus. And—"

My waving of the branch had at last dislodged some of the petals clinging to my skin. They floated through the air, and a few fell on Bartare, her face and breast.

For the first time she stirred—not only stirred but also regained consciousness with the speed of a sleeper roused by danger. Her hands brushed at her face. We were too startled to move. For so long she had been

more or less an inanimate thing that perhaps we had begun to accept her as such.

Kosgro reached for her, too late. She slipped away from his grasp with the desperate speed of an animal trying to evade capture. One of the petals from her face stuck to her fingers. She cried out, beating her hand against her body as if she must wipe away some tormenting thing.

"Bartare!" I moved toward her, and she gave a scream that brought me to a halt, throwing up her arms as a barrier, as if in me she saw some monster she could not face.

Kosgro might have reached her then, save that Oomark cut across in front of him. The man jarred into the boy, stumbled, and fought for his balance. Bartare, gaining her feet at last, gave us one last look of horror and defiance and ran—out into the mist, away from the edge of the cliff into the unknown.

Unthinkingly, I raced after her.

It was only when the mist held me that I realized my utter folly, for now we might all wander without hope of meeting. We could call and so perhaps establish contact. But such cries would certainly also attract notice we did not want or dare to face.

As soon as I was aware of my grave mistake, I paused to listen. I could hear ahead the thud of feet on the stone—Bartare. Yet when I moved, I lost that sound. So I dared not take it for a guide. I looked at the notus branch. The root had led us to it. Now could the notus lead me to Bartare? I no more than harbored that speculation when it did turn in my hold so that the fork with its double burden of flowers pointed. And I was sure that had not happened by any act of mine. I had no choice but to follow its guide.

I did as Kosgro had instructed when we hunted Oomark. I concentrated on the girl's face in my mind and let the notus point the way. It led me on, out and away from the cliff.

Once more I passed from stone to a downslope of sand and soil, stunted bushes breaking raggedly out

of the mist, to be swallowed up again. Often I stopped to listen. But if Bartare still ran, she had outdistanced me so far. I could not pick up that faint drumming of feet. No, I could not hear that. But there were other noises enough to make me sure I was not alone in the veiled countryside. Things passed to and fro there on business of their own.

I was chilled, thinking of Bartare perhaps coming face to face with one of the monsters of this land. Whether the girl could summon her Lady to her aid, I could not guess. And it might be I would have to face them both when I found her. But I dared not let that thought deter me now.

Then I heard a calling, which was not really a full sound but rather a vibration in the air, to be felt also. And since the branch pointed me in that direction, I believed Bartare was trying to summon aid. The ground fell in a sudden drop before me, and the grass and moss that clothed it was slick, so I slipped and slid to the bottom.

One of the turf-covered mounds ended my journey as I came against its wall with some force. I heard an excited laugh and looked up. Bartare knelt on the crest of the rise, staring down at me with the satisfaction of one who sees an enemy in difficulties. Then she raised an arm and signaled to something I could not see, while she called clearly, "Come and be fed, runner-in-darkness!"

I had so little warning, I was not yet on my feet, though I did reach my knees before that shadow became terrifyingly clear. It was Shuck, or enough like that monster to be its twin. And it bore down upon me slavering, but in grim and horrible silence, its fangs displayed between gaping jaws.

"Eat! Eat!" Bartare's voice no longer held a human note in its shrilling. Then she added, "A last thanks to you, Kilda. For once you are serving me well. Play with Shuck, and he will forget me."

Though I was still on my knees, I raised the flowered branch and pointed it at Shuck.

"Shuck!" I put all the force I could into that.

The creature stopped so short that it skidded, its paws cutting furrows in the soil as it tried to stop before it overran me. I then used the branch as a whip, lashing out. Shuck tried to dodge but was struck on head and shoulder by the flowers.

It leaped back and away, snarling and giving tongue in deep coughing notes. And it flattened to its belly against the ground, striving to creep at me from another angle. But I was ready for that also.

"Shuck!" I took the initiative, advancing toward the cringing monster. I waved the branch above my head. It gave ground before me until at last it flung back its head and gave a mighty howl, enough to make one's ears ring with its discordance. Then it flashed away into the mist.

I ran up the mound as fast as I could. Bartare had gone down the other side and stood at the foot. It was plain she was undecided and had not yet run into the unknown. Before she could move, I was over and down and had locked a handhold on one of her wrists.

She pulled and fought me, though only to free herself. It was plain she was in deadly fear of any touch from the branch. And though she protested every step, I dragged her with me, the mound to my left shoulder, watching ever for any attack out of the mist. So we struggled back around the end of the mound to the side I had first approached.

I had Bartare, and I thought I could keep her prisoner, at least for a space. But whether we could ever now find the others, I did not know. And the possibility that we were indeed lost was an added burden. Bartare's struggles continued, and finally I rounded on her hotly.

"If you do not be quiet, I will use this!" I waved the branch in her face, so she averted her head as far as she could.

I was in such a state then between fearing the return

of Shuck, perhaps with reinforcements, and the loss of Kosgro and Oomark that I meant it. She must have read the determination in my face, for the fight went out of her instantly.

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You do not know what you would do!" Again her voice was not that of a child. "With that you can destroy me!"

"As you would have destroyed us," I reminded her. "Were you not leading an attack against us in that city?"

She sent me one of those sly, sidewise looked such as Oomark used when farthest from his human self—only this was even more alien—to chill me anew.

"But"—shrewdly she grasped the flaw—"you do not want to kill me. You want to keep me prisoner. Therefore, you will not use that—"

I both saw and felt her body tense as she prepared to renew a struggle, so I was quick to answer her, hoping both my voice and expression would carry conviction.

"No, I do not want to kill you, Bartare. But I can use a light touch, and I think it will govern you—or make you helpless and unconscious as you were before."

I advanced the branch, and she shrank back. But she was not yet conquered.

"You cannot tell me to do this or that. I am of this world as you are not. And if you try to drag me back to that other, be warned, I shall fight you to the end—you and that sniveling creature who calls himself my brother. Brother—! As if I am kin to him! And that Between who crawls and begs and will do anything to be allowed to lick crumbs from your food bag. You three—to think you can stand against the Folk!"

"As we did when we brought you with us?" I reminded her. But my heart was heavy. I did not see how we could continue to drag her with us if she remained so defiant. As for finding out how to escape—unless—A thought rooted in my mind to grow.

"You can be truly rid of us for all time—"

"As we shall"—she flashed—"when Melusa brings you to an accounting." She laughed. "Do not think to put a spell on her by shouting aloud that name? It is not her true one, any more than Bartare is mine. You cannot so control us."

"You can be rid of us and suffer no hurt by it," I told her. "But if we have to defend ourselves, we shall, as we have already proven. Show us a way out of this world, and we will give you no more trouble."

"You, maybe, and perhaps the Between one. Oomark—he is too much one of us now. And, besides, I have no key to any world gate—not from this side."

I felt a stab of fear. What if the gates could be opened only from the other side?

"But your Melusa does. How else could she have found you over there?"

Bartare licked her lips. She no longer pulled against my hold. "And if Melusa does this, you will truly go and trouble us no more?"

"That is certain." The last thing I ever wanted to see again was this nightmare world. But neither did I have any intention of leaving Bartare. I could not honestly believe she was of unearthly blood, left on Chalox for some purpose of their own. Rather when the time came, I had every intention of seeing she went with us. It was the old, old space law that had operated since my kind had lifted from their parent world—that legendary Terra. It did not matter if your companion was your blackest enemy—you did not leave him behind on an alien planet. You fought to the death to get him free and off.

I had no affection for Bartare, but neither would I leave her here if we ever did have the great good fortune to find a gate. How I would manage to transport

Oomark in his changed state and her, I did not know. Now it was enough to make a pact with her to keep her less a burden.

"I do not altogether believe you," she said. "However—" What she might have added, she did not say. Instead, her expression changed, and I had only that much warning to turn and face what crept there.

Shuck had managed to summon a partner, or else he now had a thing to dispute his prey. As one who had had access to Lazk Volk's library of weird wonders, I thought that nothing could astound me, but this gibbering monstrosity was the worst I had yet seen.

My species has an inborn aversion to the reptilian, though since we have taken to space, we have managed to modify it in the case of such races as the Zacathans and one or two others, whose ancestors wore scales when ours wore fur. But enough of that primeval horror was in me now to hold me for what might have been a fatal second or two.

The thing was a nauseous mixture of humanoid and reptile. It had a green-skinned body studded with warts and swellings. Its outstretched hands were four-fingered with a disk sucker on the inner side of each digit. The body was bloated, mostly hanging stomach, its legs short and bowed as if by the weight of that paunch. The head was large and round, with eyes planted well to the top and very large. There was no sign of ears, but a mouth gaped, and from the inner part of that—

Instinct, perhaps heightened by all that had gone before, saved me. At the moment of attack I held up the branch, and that long, slippery cord of a tongue that whipped out, dripping evil yellow slime, touched one of the flower clusters.

It snapped back instantly into the mouth, which also clapped shut. The thing, with a curiously human gesture, brought both of its hands over that mouth, staggered back and away, tearing at the thin bands of darker green that marked its lips, shaking its bubble head from side to side, plainly in agony.

"Come!" Bartare pulled at me. I went, though in part

I faced the creature as I retreated. It had fallen back against the mound and was still tearing at its mouth, for the moment seeming no longer aware of us.

We scraped along the earthen wall as fast as we could. But what if Shuck waited beyond? After a last wary glance at the green thing, I looked ahead. No black form there. However, were we to head into the mist, anything might come at us unseen.

And besides, how could I find Kosgro and Oomark without any guide or landmark? Or—I looked to Bartare.

"Can you find your brother?" If he had been able to trail her across this world, surely she ought to be able to do the same.

When she did not answer at once, I wondered if I could ever force such information out of her. My hold over her, if I had any at all, was very slight.

"You have that which will keep off Dark Ones," she said at last. "But not all of them can be controlled. I do not think, your being what you are, you will go and leave them with me. That is not the way of your kind. And—perhaps I have been in a small way changed by living with your people after all. Yes, I can find Oomark—and if he is with the Between one, that one also. Come!"

I had no recourse but to trust her, though it was a wrench to leave the illusion of safety the mound at my back gave me. Yet that was no real defense against Shuck or the warty thing. My best weapon I carried ready in my hand, and I must be ever alert, not only to any hostile move from Bartare, but also to what might move within the mist.

We faced that slick slope down which I had come, and it was hard to climb this. So engaged, I had no hold over Bartare. If she took off again, I would be lost.

But at last we reached the top and had the graveled rise before us. Then, remembering the trick Kosgro had taught me, I turned every few steps and swept our back trail lightly with the notus, hoping thus to ward off pursuit.

"The mist lifts," Bartare observed, which was true, but I was tiring, and all I could think of was that we must find a place of refuge. The safest was, certainly, the notus grove—if we could force Oomark and Bartare into it. Once there, perhaps Kosgro could play some trick with illusion that would serve to solve our problem temporarily.

Now we were back on that expanse of rock at the crest. And—all was well! Kosgro had not gone searching for me, but sat there with Oomark, now almost as thickly haired, leaning against him within the circle of his arm.

They arose as we joined them. I saw a questioning look on Kosgro's face. Familiarity with his brutish features had taught me to recognize the small changes of expression. But he asked nothing until I turned to give a last sweep behind.

Then he did say, "Company?"

"Yes, and such as I do not like at my back."

"Then it is well to move on."

"Down there." I pointed to the cliff. I expected some dissent from Oomark, but the boy said nothing. He had remained close to the man, holding on to one of the big hands.

But when Bartare came to the rock rim, she balked. Perhaps the notus scent was a warning.

"No! I won't!" Her protest was now in the voice of a stubborn child.

I did not know whether to threaten her again with the branch, but Kosgro faced her.

"You will!" he said, with confidence. "Or else you shall remain here—alone."

Since she had already run into the mist, seemingly without fear, I could not see in that any threat to move her. But again it appeared the other three shared knowledge denied me.

Kosgro held up his hand. "Listen!"

We did. The clamor from the site of the fell-worm's death, which had been muffled by the mist, sounded

louder. There was snarling, growling—worse I could not identify.

"They have finished what chance gave them," Kosgro was saying to Bartare. "Those who came too late will have their appetites aroused and naught to answer. It will not be long before they cast about and pick up our trail—"

She interrupted him. "The Dark Ones hunt only during indraw." She was like some small creature at bay, darting quick glances right and left in search of escape. So I moved between her and the way we had just come.

"When they hunger, they will hunt at any time. And below lies the only safe place. They will not go there, not even under the lash of some power."

"We can't! I can't!" Her protest was a cry. She had lost the assurance she had shown with me. Perhaps, because Kosgro was more of this world, she saw in him a more formidable opponent.

"We can, you can." He returned. "It is that or face that which will come. It will come hungry and not be turned aside. And you know well, Bartare, that to flee such when they hunger is merely to arouse them to greater efforts. You run—if you run—to no good end. There is no refuge here, save that below."

"But the notus is death also!" She twisted her hands together.

"Not so. You have tasted of the notus, when Kilda broke your spell. Has it killed you?"

She hesitated before she answered. "It made me sleep—dream. I do not want such dreams! I will not have them!"

"The notus touched you. But you can shelter in its shadow and not touch it. Neither can those others touch you."

I do not believe she was convinced, but somehow he had mastered her. She shrank. I cannot otherwise describe what happened to her better than to say she shrank into the girl child she must have been meant to be.

When he beckoned, she went, even though it was plain she dreaded each forward step. And I knew a vast relief as she slipped over the rim, Oomark close behind. Kosgro signaled me. I shook my head.

"I last, and I shall brush the way with this." I shook the branch, for I thought not only of the unseen menaces by the worm site, but also of the warty thing. Had it recovered from its tongue wounding, it might be following. And there was something about that creature which made it, to me, worse than Shuck or Skark. I never wanted to face it again.

"Well enough." He lowered himself over the rim awkwardly, as if he found movement difficult. I wondered about his wound. Had his recent exertions opened it? He had never permitted me to tend it, and I could not urge such service on him against his will.

True to my promise, I paused wherever the handholds allowed and swept with the notus. As had been true of the earlier branch, this one showed no signs as yet of wilting or fading. And I made up my mind that when we moved on from the grove, I might try for a second such to hold in reserve.

The scent was strong. I drew deep breaths of it, relaxing. When I turned at the foot to face the grove, I saw Kosgro a little ahead, an arm about each child, urging them on, though it was plain that to walk under the branches there was an ordeal for all concerned.

We went on until we came to an open space where no tree stood, and over us was only the mist-silver of the sky. There Kosgro released the children, and they dropped down, stiff and silent. One might have believed they were pent in the midst of some great evil.

I went to put my hands on the trunk of the nearest tree, feeling once more that most welcome moisture. I ran my wet palms across my face, which revived me as if I had drunk my fill at some streamside. Then I pulled loose my under tunic and tore a strip from its edge. This I patted against the bole, soaking up all the liquid I could find. With it well dampened, I returned to the others.

I had found that moisture so reviving that I could not help but believe it would aid Kosgro. His head was forward on his chest, so I could not see his face, and both hands were pressed to the bandage about him. I knelt and put as gentle a hand as I could on his shoulder.

"You must let me tend your hurt," I told him. "If it becomes infected, that means disaster, not only for you, but all of us well."

He gazed at me dully, as if he did not hear, or if he heard, as if he did not understand what I said. I laid the dampened cloth across my branch, thus supporting it free of contact with the ground, and I pushed aside his hands to unfasten and unwind that stained and dirty cloth. Under it, along the arch of his big chest, was a puffed red line. I knew little of wounds and their tending, but it seemed bad to me.

His head had fallen forward again, and he did not raise his hand in protest. I took up the wet cloth and began to touch it to the red puffiness, keeping my fingering as light and delicate as I could.

He winced and started. Then, as one who steels himself to some necessary pain, his body tensed. Twice I went back to the trees to wet my swab, returning to dab at the wound. The third time I leaned back on my heels. I was astonished by what I saw, nor could I believe at first that my eyes reported correctly. The inflammation was clearly less. It would appear that the notus had more than one virtue for those who could accept it.

For the third time I wet the cloth, and then I wrapped it around him, making it fast with the same pin he had used to secure the first bandage. It was a collar badge, discolored, but still of a First-In Scout. He gave a sigh when I had done, his body relaxing.

"How bad is it?" he asked.

"Bad, I thought. But the tree dew has helped. It is not so inflamed now."

Cautiously he flexed his muscles. "You must be right. There is far less pain now."

I sacrificed more of my tunic. This was the last length I dared rip from it. Once more I wet that patch at the trees and took it to Oomark.

"Let me wash your face." He jerked and would have dodged. But Kosgro held him. Again I touched delicately, knowing the child's fear of the notus. He did not cry out as I thought he would, but endured what I did to him, his body trembling.

Once more I collected the precious moisture. When I came back, Bartare was on her feet, scuffling with Kosgro.

"Don't do that!" she shrieked as I advanced on her. "If you do, you'll be sorry! I can't find your old gate for you—I'll, I'll be Between—Between!" So frantic were her struggles and cries that I stopped.

"But you'll need water, Bartare, and I've discovered this dew is the same as having plenty to drink."

"Make me do it then," she flung at me, "and see what happens. The notus makes the Folk forget if they use it. I tell you I'll forget everything—all you need me most to remember!"

It was plain she believed what she said, and I dared not take the chance of proving it. If Bartare needed water, she would have to wait until we were able to travel on and could find some pool or stream.

But I folded the dampened cloth I had not been able to use and tucked it between my belt and my skin under the curtailed length of my under tunic.

Kosgro untied a bundle from his belt, our food. When he passed it to me, I opened it—so much less than we needed. I offered some to the children. Bartare refused with exaggerated gestures of revulsion. But to my surprise, Oomark accepted a wafer. He ate it in small bites, which he chewed as if he mouthed something bitter, but still he ate.

Watching him, I felt a small spring of hope. Perhaps the notus had wrought something of a change. That he had taken a step back along the right road I was sure.

The portion Kosgro and I shared was very small indeed. But somehow my body did not crave more. Then

I inspected the wrappings on my feet. The strips frayed and wore through so fast. I must have something to protect them better. I was examining what I did have ruefully when Kosgro spoke.

"Why not try those?" He pointed to where a drift of the ribbon-like leaves lay under the nearest tree. They were yellow and sere, but when I picked up a handful and pulled and twisted it, I discovered that the leaves were unbelievably tough. Straightway I gathered a lapful of them.

"Let me." Kosgro took some, and though his fingers jerked and muscles quivered as if he found the occupation painful, he began to braid and weave them together with more skill than my fumbling attempts could equal. I followed his example until together we had achieved two sets of mats, four in all, thick as the width of my thumb, and some rough cords also twisted out of leaf fibers.

The sandals I bound on my misshapen feet in the end were no master works of art, but they certainly gave me protection, perhaps better than any I had had since I had discarded my boots. I sat surveying them with no small satisfaction while I tied the last cord firmly.

How long they might last I did not know, but in any case I must be prepared for when they did give out. I set about making a bundle of leaves, laying them straight and tying them together, intending to carry them with me.

I regretted the bag of stones that Kosgro had dropped at the site of the worm struggle. Not only was it our only weapon, but I had also stuffed into it Oomark's discarded clothing, which might have had good use now. I began to think about it.

"What do you plan now?"

I was so startled at what seemed a reading of my thoughts, or rather of very hazy intentions, that I stared at Kosgro. That he would agree to trying to retrieve the bag, I thought unlikely, but I did want it.

"We left the bag back there."

"And you propose to go after it—a bag weighted with stones?" He laughed harshly. "You think it a treasure worth returning for?"

I was stung. "It served you well enough with the worm. If it had not been for that, you—we'd all be dead!"

"You have no idea of what is back there now."

"I have the notus—"

"Do not become overconfident because of that. There is such a thing as ambush. You do not know the kind of things that lurk here. Such senses as we have to serve us are not able to alert us in time to protect against some prowlers. Notus or not—" He threw up his hands in an odd little gesture. "But if one cannot argue with you—if you must face fate—"

Oddly enough, it was his surrender, the feeling in his tone that I could not identify, which decided me. I have always believed that the foolhardy is no hero, and sometimes far worse than a coward. The few advantages that the bag might have given us would not outweigh embroilment with monsters. I remembered vividly that it had been only the surprise in Bartare's eyes that had saved me from the warty thing stalking behind my back.

"You're right."

His big gash of a mouth smiled. "May the fates witness this historic moment—a woman admits she is wrong."

It was my turn to laugh. "Not so! I did not say I was wrong—I said you are right."

"So that is your way of dodging the issue, Kilda? Well, even so much will satisfy me. Do not grieve for your bag of stones. I may be able to turn up some better weapons and a lot less clumsy, too."

He stood up, flexing his thick arms. It was plain he could move with more vigor than he had when we had reached the grove. Seeing that, I grew more confident.

Then he began to move around the edges of the clearing, stooping to search among the fallen leaves, covered in some places by a snow of faded blossoms.

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Having made a circuit of the clearing, he returned with a gleaning of sticks, fallen branches of trees. Now he tested them. Two broke under his flexing, but three held. Two of those were as thick as two of my fingers laid together, but the third was of greater size and, at one end, had stubs of branchlets protruding.

Kosgro switched the three through the air and thrust in and out with them as I had seen swords used in tridee tapes made on primitive worlds.

"Not much compared to a laser," he commented, "but an improvement on your stone bag." And he sketched a gesture in my direction, which, made by a less brutish body, might have been the formal bow-of-courtesy of an inner planet man.

Puny and weak those looked when I thought of them being employed against any of the monsters. But they were of notus wood, which might give them more value than mere wooden rods.

"You can handle these," I observed. "But earlier, when you tried to touch the branch—"

"Yes! It is true the notus no longer bothers me. The food—this"—he touched his new bandage—"are all working!"

I had noted no outward change in him as had occurred in me when I first took up the notus. But then I had not been so long nor so deeply under the influence of this world.

"This and this, I think." He dropped one of the thin

branches, but kept hold on the other two. "There is something else we may try."

Back he went to the trees, gathering up handfuls of the withered blossoms. Again it appeared he could now handle such without danger as he brought them back to me.

"We rub these along the sticks," he said, sitting down cross-legged to use half his harvest for just that purpose, while I followed his example with the other branch.

Mashed in my hand, the flowers became an oily pulp. The odor was very strong, too sweet. But I rubbed with a will, and the mess in my hand seemed to be absorbed by the wood so worked upon. Also the white bark glowed with phosphorescence, so that when we shook the last sticky fragments from our hands, we had not only crude weapons but also torches of a kind.

Kosgro sent his in a whistling slash through the air, and there was a cry in answer. Bartare, who had been sitting in sullen silence, whom I had ignored, thinking her best left alone for a space, cowered away, although that blow had not come anywhere near her. She did not get to her feet, but began to retreat, her face turned to Kosgro, as if she dared not look away as she crawled from him.

"Proof of the effectiveness of these," he observed. "We may have something as good as lasers."

"No!" When I would have gone to her, concerned by her plainly abject terror, she threw up her arms. I could have held a lash ready in my hand. And I was ashamed of arousing such fear.

I dropped the stick I held and put out my empty hands.

"See, I don't have it, Bartare. Don't be frightened."

She peered out from under those sheltering arms and then lowered them. Her green eyes were very large in her small face. And it was in that moment that I realized how little physical change there had been in her.

Her gaze was wary, and I said, "We would not hurt you, Bartare. Why do you fear?"

"Accursed!" She half screamed, making a gesture that included not only the notus about us, but also Kosgro and me. "For the Folk accursed!"

"Why?" I prodded.

"Before the Folk, of those who came before. The Folk entered through a gate, and they were few. The others here gave them refuge and let them be. But those others, they did not use the treasures of this world. They did not want to summon powers and rule them. And the Folk found that they could. Then at last the others said that they must not do such things and that a gate would be opened and the Folk must leave through it to a new world again. But the Folk did not want that, for if they so went for any length of time, they grew old, their power dwindled, and they died.

"So they warred with the others. And they won, for their powers were strong. But the others, they had their own ways," she intoned, as if she were chanting some ancient saga or half-forgotten history, "and they left checks upon the powers. Though most of the others used their gates and went away, there were some who chose to stay—"

Kosgro went down on one knee before her, listening as if this was of importance to us all. "Are they still here then, Bartare, these others who war with the Folk?"

She shook her head. "That is not known. They set barriers in some places that the Folk cannot pass. But since, after long watching, nothing has come forth, the Folk believe they are either dead or gone. But the notus they left, and it cannot be rooted out or killed by the Folk. And it is bad!" Her face contorted into an expression of loathing. "It hurts, it destroys, and it makes one lose power and forget the rituals. It is an enemy like the Dark Ones. And now you take it into your hands —and you will use it against the Folk!"

She began to cry, such crying as is rooted in a des-

olation of spirit and depth of sorrow no child should experience. I went to her, taking her in my arms, holding her young body, racked with sobs, close to mine. And I spoke as soothingly as I could.

"Bartare, we shall not use these weapons against anything except that which attacks us. The Folk themselves fight the Dark Ones, do they not? So shall we. We mean no harm to those of this world. All we want, as I have told you, is to be safely back in our own place once again."

I did not know whether she was so lost in the depths of her misery that she could not understand or even hear me, for there was no response. Then I was surprised by Oomark. He came to us and took, timidly, his sister's hand from where it lay limply on my knee and held it between two of his.

"Bartare," he said, "you do not need us, do you? You will be glad if we go. The Lady does not want us, not truly."

She gave a hiccuping sigh and turned her head on my shoulder so she could see him. "They want to take you—me—back with them!"

"They want the most to go back themselves," he answered her. "And the Lady, she can stop them taking us, if she truly wants to."

Something in that shadowy doubt acted upon Bartare as a goad. She pushed against me, moving apart.

"She wants *me!*" Bartare flashed, though I noted she did not add Oomark's name to that. "She won't let me go! All right." Once more in command of herself, too quickly to be normal, she spoke more to Kosgro than to me. "All right! I'll take you to a gate—if I can find one—and then you can go through. And we'll be glad, glad, glad!" With each "glad" she pounded her fist against the ground as if beating an enemy.

"How far from here?" Kosgro wanted to know.

She shrugged. "How can I tell in this place? The notus shuts off mind-search. I shall have to be out of this place before I can sense it."

So we would once more have to depend upon a guide

we could not trust, and I did not like it. And Bartare would be even less to be trusted than Oomark. Could we use him for a check on her?

The indraw having lifted, we at last left the grove, though I hated to see the last of that sanctuary. We did not turn back in the direction of the fell-worm's ending, but struck off at an angle. Since there was no way of checking compass points, I never knew whether we headed north, east, south, or west. In fact, I always feared that we might wander in circles.

Bartare led through a side valley or canyon. She set a fast pace at first. I think she was very eager to be away from the notus. Then she came to a halt as the last of the fragrance vanished.

"Leave me—stand away!" She made an emphatic gesture at us and climbed to the top of a tall rock. There she stood, her eyes closed, before she began to turn slowly. Three times she so revolved. Then she raised her hand and held it out as she started that turn for the fourth time.

Her hand shot out and stiffened into a point. Now she opened her eyes and beckoned to us with her other hand.

"That way."

She was plainly certain. But whether she was guiding us to a gate or rather to some stronghold of the Folk where we would be captured, we could not be sure. I only hoped Oomark's reasoning had decided her.

Once more we came out of the rocks into a wide stretch of turfed country that had rings growing in it. And shortly we came upon one of the thickets of yellow berry bushes. Bartare sped ahead, stripping the berries and eating them avidly. Oomark started after her and then paused. But when he made up his mind and joined her, I noticed that he did not feast with the same relish he had displayed before. He took only a handful and ate them slowly.

Bartare was at last satisfied, and when she joined us, her smile held much of the old sly insolence. She was fast recovering from her breakdown in the grove.

"It is too bad you will not eat of the food of the Folk," she remarked. "Why do you want to be Between, Kilda? Is it because you are afraid?"

"I am afraid of not being me—Kilda c' Rhyn," I told her.

"As if Kilda c'Rhyn is so great a thing!"

"To me it is. I was born so—I wish to remain so."

"Yet you think of *me* as a child! And I am so much wiser than you shall ever be. It is like one picking an apple of the Sun, to eat only the skin and throw away the inner part."

"There is such a thing as too much knowledge—of the wrong kind," I replied. For some reason she was trying to provoke me. If she had been malleable in the grove, she was now her old difficult self. And that alarmed me, for she could well be preparing to lead us into a trap.

"You!" She swung now to Kosgro. "Has being a Between been so good a life? Do you also want to be yourself? But what now *is* yourself?"

"Suppose you tell me," he countered. "You say you are of the Folk and I am Between. Does that not make me beneath your notice altogether?" As he spoke, he swung his length of notus, and that she eyed, losing a little of her assurance.

She did not answer him, but said rather to all of us, "Your gate lies ahead. Come if you wish to find it."

Once more she set off, and we followed. But my misgivings grew the greater with each step.

The green turf made a carpet for our feet. My sandals of dried leaves were more comfortable than the wrappings. I felt as if I walked on cushions.

Finally we came to a place where stood a mound taller than any I had yet seen, covered thick with turf save on the side facing us, where that green had been cut away to show gray ground in the form of a symbol taller than a man. Against the green it was such a signpost as none could overlook.

Bartare halted at the foot of the mound, gazing up

at the symbol. Then she turned to us with a triumphant smile.

"I promised to bring you to a gate. And that I have done. But opening it is another matter, and one I can*not* do. So now how will you manage?"

Kosgro was a little behind her, also studying the symbol. I thought it must have some meaning for him. However, Bartare had hammered home our helplessness. We could be well within the power of reaching the sane world of Dylan and still find all our struggles worthless.

"What—" I began when Kosgro waved me into silence. There was that about him which suggested dawning excitement. Did he see some way out of our dilemma?

He raised the notus and pointed its tip at the symbol. Bartare cried out and would have sprung at him, her hand outstretched to catch at the arm supporting the rod. I moved, setting my own thinner branch before her as a barrier. She fell back, her face convulsed as she babbled words I did not understand.

Kosgro moved again. With the tip of the notus staff he traced the lines of the symbol, painting them in the air, for that literally happened. The tip left a shining line in the air, copying in miniature the greater drawing on the mound. Though he dropped the rod, that shining in the air held steady.

Then, raising the staff again, he balanced it as a man might balance a throwing spear. He shouted two words aloud and hurled the notus through the center of the symbol in the air. On and up it went, until it struck the center of the mound cutting and stood there quivering.

The words he had shouted were repeated and repeated again by such force of echo as I had never before heard, until the separate sounds made a single thunderous roll. From the quivering rod aloft burst a bright column of white fire.

The noise stilled. Bartare had folded into herself on

the ground, her arms over her head for protection, Oomark similarly balled near her. But Kosgro stood erect facing the fire he had so oddly kindled, and I was shoulder to shoulder beside him.

I longed to ask what he was doing. Did he have the "power," or whatever was needed, to open the gate? However, when I saw his attention so fixed upon the fire, I dared not speak.

No gate opened. But with another blast of sound, something appeared between us and that flaming rod. Kosgro reached out, though he did not look to me, and caught out of my hold the second notus rod, dropping its point a little, but holding it as a man would hold a weapon.

The whirl of light solidified. Once more we fronted the woman, if woman she truly was, who had been with Bartare in the city. She did not move or make any gesture, only watched us, her beautiful face expressionless.

That she was beautiful was true. And I think she was one who delighted in using that beauty as a weapon. But if she thought to do so now with Kosgro, she must have been disappointed.

"Melusa." He greeted her briskly as one wanting to bargain and not waste time about it.

"That is one of my titles," she replied, her words, though quietly spoken, carrying as clearly as the horn of the dark hunter. And they were as chilling as that sound also. She might be of the Folk, but to us she turned the face of a Dark One.

"What would you?" She came to the point as directly as he had done.

"A gate opened."

Now a faint shadow of smile curved those too perfect lips. "Ah, little man, you know not what you ask, or you would not demand it of me."

"I ask return for myself, for these who are not of this world. We have no proper place here—let us go."

"Or what will you do?" She was an adult, amused by the importunities of a child.

"Use this." He raised the rod he held a fraction higher. "And that—" I guessed what he wished and shook the flowering branch I carried.

"You use what you do not understand, perhaps to a purpose you will not wish. You are not an adept, nor even of the Folk. What you have rashly seized upon can destroy you the quicker."

"It has served us well so far. I think that you are the one who needs to fear it the most. We ask little of you—an open gate—for we are not of your molding and making."

"One is." Her voice was a little sharper. "She was sought and shaped to our needs. We do not bargain for our own."

"Your own? Yet she could not stand against us when you bade her show her powers. You had her shaping, yet she failed the test you set her. Look upon her! Is she yours to her heart?"

"Melusa!" Bartare was on her feet. Now she ran past us and began to climb the mound, her arms outstretched as if to embrace the woman who waited there. But Melusa made no answering gesture in welcome.

"So"—she spoke over the child's head to Kosgro—"with you is it all?"

"It is. Nor do you wish that which is flawed in your eyes."

"Melusa!" Bartare's cry was one of pain. She had tried to reach the woman of the Folk. Now she swayed and beat with both hands on what seemed an invisible wall between them.

"If she was of your true kin, could she not pass the protection?" Kosgro continued. "You have set that up against any danger to you. Why, then, does it keep out one you have named 'daughter'?"

"Melusa!" Bartare was screaming that name now. She had slipped to her knees, but still she beat on that surface we could not see, walled away from the woman.

"You argue with a serpent's tongue!" flashed the woman. For the first time her calm cracked.

"I do not argue, I state such facts as we can all see.

Bartare has not betrayed you, but it seems that you or yours stand aside from her. Would not your protection allow her past if she really was of your kith and kin?"

"She was one of our chosen ones, long schooled and waited for." Melusa looked down at the girl who could not join her. "Why should the protection reject her?" She pointed one hand at Bartare, who lifted her head, her eyes streaming tears, in silent pleading.

There was a long moment of silence broken only by Bartare's sobbing. Then Melusa spoke again.

"I know not why or how. But it seems she is not one of us. You have done this then—!" There was about her such an aura of menace that I clutched the notus branch more tightly.

Once more she pointed her hand, this time at Kosgro. From the tips of her long fingers there shot a ray of green light. But as swiftly as she had moved, so did he counter by crossing that with the notus rod, which cut it as cleanly as if the ray were solid and a knife had sliced it. The portion that was so defected fell back at an angle to the ground, where a curl of smoke arose from a rapidly widening patch of black charring.

I was half expecting her next move and had the branch ready, for now she pointed to me. The heat of the ray she directed I could feel since, though I held the branch well out, it did not give me the length of reach Kosgro had. But he whirled half around and slashed at the ray held at bay by my frail shield and again deflected it.

"You see"—his voice was calm and confident—"we cannot be handled so. I know that the Folk are not of those who battle fruitlessly against odds. Let us go, for if we remain, we shall ever be a center of conflict. And your world has too many such now, for if we are still here when you open the gates to recruit, who knows what may happen? Like attracts like. We can sweep into our company those answering your beckoning. What would that do to your plans and needs?"

How much of his threat was possible, I did not know. But perhaps neither did Melusa. However, she made

one more trial of us. This time she reached out her arms to Bartare and called, in a softened voice and one utterly beguiling; "Bartare, come to me!"

And the girl tried with all her might, throwing herself against that invisible barrier until she sank down, still feebly beating at it with bruised hands. Yet it held fast. And at last Melusa's arms fell to her sides, and she spoke to Kosgro.

"If the protection holds against her—then she is useless to us. It seems that in some manner you have corrupted her. Therefore, she is yours. You ask for a gate—well enough, you shall have it—"

"No!" Kosgro interrupted her with an authoritative note in his voice. "I did not ask for *a* gate. I asked for *our* gates—the one through which I entered and the one through which these others came. We will not have another strange world set before us but those which were our own before we were drawn here."

How was he to make sure of that? We could be deceived even now. I wondered what safeguard we could summon against treachery.

"Your own gates? Very well." That shadow smile I did not like grew stronger and I liked it even less, for it made her beauty even more sinister. "You shall have what you ask for, though you may find that it shall profit you little and that even being Between is better."

"By the Seven Names you will swear—by Archeron, by Balafmar, by—"

Her face held lines of horror, and she raised her hand as if to hurl some ill fate at him.

"Do not sully those powers with your tongue. You are filth, muck, less than nothing! It is not allowed for such as you to call upon *them!* You have so profaned great things and deserve—"

He silenced her for a moment, but no more, by raising the rod. "Filth am I, and muck, and such as dares not recite your names of power? Yet I hold this which is of a greater power, and I am neither blasted nor overborne in the doing of it. I have learned some of your secrets, Melusa. And such as I have learned, I

have held against this hour when I might force one of you to do my bidding. Therefore, I say to you, swear by those names when you say you will return us to the worlds from whence we came."

She had herself under control now, but red hate burned in her eyes. "I cannot return you to those worlds. I can but open the gates. The going through must be yours."

"So be it. But first you swear."

And she swore, though the names were sounds not clear to my hearing, but they seemed to satisfy Kosgro. When she was done, he nodded.

"Well enough. Now the gates, Melusa."

I reached down and gave one hand to Oomark. He caught it in a tight grip. Then I went to Bartare. She tried to jerk away from me, but her strength was so spent that she could not resist my hold. I was determined that we three be so linked as to be together when we went back to where we belonged.

Then I looked at Kosgro. Now that the time had come when we would separate, I was confused and unhappy. There was so much I wanted to say but no time left in which to say it. Suddenly I did not want to go without him. Yet that was what he had asked, and by his choice I must abide.

He was still watching Melusa.

"We are ready, Lady."

"Go then, and get what peace you can out of it!" she cried. She stamped her foot on the turf. From that impact a crack opened and spread with great speed, as if the mound were being riven apart to form a dark archway.

"Come on!" For the last time I would hear Kosgro say that. He marched into the dark, and reluctantly I followed, drawing the children with me.

17

We were caught in a darkness that was also movement. There was a sensation of being whirled this way and that. I was no longer conscious of my body, if I kept hold of the children, if I had been reduced to a wisp blown by some storm. Then the darkness was entire, and I was at rest.

Such contentment did not last. In me grew a nagging, urging me to effort. And that I could not escape, so I opened my eyes.

Here was no dark. Sun was warm, hot on me, blazing down to set me blinking, half-blinded—a natural, normal sun, what I had so long missed in that place of eternal mist.

I sat up to look around, to make sure I was back in a world like that of my birth. There was a stretch of sand on which I had lain, beyond red rocks among gray ones. Seeing those, I found memory stirred, a small prick of fear. Red rocks—? There was a good reason to fear those.

Within touching distance lay a small body. It wore only rags of breeches, but it was human! No horns showed on the forehead, and its bare feet were feet, not hoofs! I gave a sigh of relief. Oomark was a boy again, not the changeling the other world had made him.

Oomark— But where was Bartare? Had she escaped me during the transition, remained in the gray land? I looked around. No—there lay a huddle of green, with thin, pale legs and arms outflung, as if she had not

fallen there gently but had been carelessly tossed aside, a toy for which some giant child had no longer any desire.

It was to her I crawled first, turning her over, raising her in my arms, fearing in those first moments that she did not sleep but had left us forever. Her eyes were tightly closed under that black bar of eyebrow, and her face was pale, as if she had suffered some long and wasting illness. But she breathed evenly and lightly, as if she lay in normal sleep.

"Bartare!" I called her name softly, resting her head against my shoulder."Bartare!"

She stirred. Her lips shaped words too low for me to hear. Then she opened her eyes and looked into my face. For a moment I read no recognition in them, only hazy bewilderment. Then memory must have returned, for her face mirrored such desolation I thought no child could feel. She began to cry, not in noisy, protesting sobs, but with a depth of silent sorrow. So her tears gathered and ran down her cheeks, her mouth worked, and yet she made no sound. The sight of that awoke all my sympathy. I held her even closer, rocking her back and forth, crooning with my lips close to her tumbled hair, trying to give her all the comfort she would accept from me.

"Kilda?" Oomark sat up and looked at us. There was a shadow of fear in his face. He crawled across the sand and gravel to my side and threw his arms about both me and his sister, burrowing as close to us as he could. We might have been the only point of safety in a hostile world. I loosened part of my hold on Bartare to put an arm about him also, holding them both.

"It is all right," I repeated over and over, making singsong of the words. "It is all right. We are back, back where we belong."

This was the place where our adventure had begun, the stretch of dried river valley with the sounding rocks that had opened the gate between worlds. How long had we been gone? Time measurement escaped me. I could only guess that it must add up to days, and we

must have been the objects of a search. Perhaps such searchers were still about, and I could find them. My body ached with a depth of fatigue I did not remember ever having felt before. I looked to my feet wearing those crude sandals—the branch— For the first time I remembered the notus and looked to my belt, where I had made it fast before I had caught at the children by the symboled mound. But it was gone. However, my feet—they were my feet again with proper toes. So I must be all human once more, even as Oomark was.

"I'm hungry and cold. I want to go home!" Oomark cried.

"We shall, oh, we shall. Bartare, my dear, do you think you can walk a little? If we get back to the ranger station, we can get home quickly."

"I was home—you brought me away." Her voice was small, crushed, woeful. Now she pushed away from me.

"I want to go home now! Please, Kilda, I want to go home!" Oomark stood up, tugging at my hand.

I arose, surveying the valley and the air above, hoping to sight some searcher who would spare us the trip on foot back to the station, for my body protested every movement as if I had been put to some severe strain.

But there was no sign of anyone else. We might have been on a deserted world. Kosgro—on what planet had he awakened? Would he return to his ship and rise on a new voyage of discovery with his ordeal in the gray country only another incident in an adventurous life? Would he try to trace us and our fate through some official channel—or could I do so for him? But that thought I put from me now. The important thing was to get back to the station and then to Tamlin.

Bartare did not protest. She appeared to accept that there would be no return to the other world. But her silent, woeful crying continued. Now and then she smeared the palms of her hands across her cheeks, wiping away the tears.

We had reached the top of the river valley cliff when I realized that the trip back to the station was going to be even more difficult than I had thought. My aching

body resisted each new effort I demanded of it, and the children were lagging. I had no strength to carry them. We leaned against some rocks for support, while once more I searched the skies and the country for some sign of life.

"Kilda! There—someone's coming!" Oomark pointed, not at the sky but out over the tumbled rocks. Only it was not a ranger combing for us. A single figure advanced, slowly, pausing often with one hand or the other braced against a nearby boulder, as if that support were badly needed.

I waved both my arms and shouted, "Here! Here we are!"

There was a gesture to acknowledge my call, and that other turned his slow march in our direction. He must be in trouble or hurt, he made such an effort to reach us.

As he came closer, I saw that he was a young man, and he was not wearing a ranger's uniform. Tattered remains of breeches did cover part of his body, and around his chest was a bandage. The skin of his hands and face was very dark, the space tan of a starfarer, but on the less exposed parts of his body it was ivory-white. He had no sign of beard—another indication he was a spacer, since facial hair for them was eradicated on first showing. Dark red hair was cropped very close, a mere stubble on his skull, though his brows were as black as my own. His face was drawn and gaunt, the bones standing out clearly beneath the stretch of dark skin. It was plain he was in no better shape than we.

My attention centered on that bandage—I stood very still, hardly breathing. Could it be—? But Melusa had sworn to return us to our own worlds. Why would Kosgro be here? He had landed his scout on an uninhabitated planet, then fallen through a gate by chance. This was Dylan, for over a hundred years a known and settled world.

I took a step or two to meet him, and I made a question of a name: "Jorth Kosgro?"

He halted, holding to a rock with his left hand,

brushing the right across his eyes, as if he were in doubt of seeing clearly.

"So she broke oath after all," he said. "She sent you after me."

"No! It was the other way around!" Though Melusa had willingly or unwillingly betrayed him, I was glad, in spite of knowing what this must mean to him. "This is Dylan—she sent you with us!"

He stared at me. "It is"—he answered me slowly, spacing his words as I might have done if I had been trying to impress something upon a child's mind and that child was only half attentive—"the planet on which I made landfall. It is not on any map—I discovered it."

"It is Dylan!" I countered. "This is the way we came—" I gestured toward the hidden station. "Why, there is a ranger station just behind those ridges. They should be out hunting us now. And we are a short flitter flight from Tamlin, a port city."

He balled the hand resting against the rock into a fist and brought it hard against the stone. "I tell you, I planeted on an unknown world. I have not yet sent in a report—I can take you to my ship—prove it—"

It was delirium, of course, born of his wound. I surveyed the bandage I had adjusted. There were no fresh stains on it. Even if the wound had not broken open, he must be under great strain. We had had very little food. As soon as we could get to the station, they would be able to give him proper care.

"Come on!" Oomark ran back to catch Kosgro by the hand. "Please, we're so hungry. It isn't far to the station, really it isn't. And they'll give us something to eat."

Kosgro looked down into his small face. "Where is this place?" he asked, as if the boy's answer was very important.

"Well, I don't know exactly where this is," Oomark began to my dismay. His hesitation would only feed Kosgro's delusion. "We aren't very far from the Lugraan Valley and the park where the flitters are. Gen-

tlehomo Largrace brought my class from school. And Kilda and Bartare, they came with our families for the picnic. We were to watch the Lugraans and write a report. And the rangers said for us to keep together and not wander. I'll bet they'll be awfully mad when they find us. Kilda, will they be so mad that they'll tell the commandant and have him punish us?" For the first time since his return, he looked apprehensive.

"I think when Commandant Piscov knows the whole story, he'll understand." I hastened to reassure him.

Kosgro glanced from one to the other of us. There was a stunned expression on his dark face. But when Oomark pulled at his hand again, he came.

"I want to see this ranger station, this flitter park. Show me!" he said.

We went very slowly along the rough way. I was more than a little worried. The fact we had met no searchers bothered me. Surely the rangers would have maintained a lookout on one of the higher points with distance glasses, as a check. Yet, save for some flying things, the world might have been as barren of others of our kind as Kosgro insisted it was.

Coming to the top of the slope, we looked down at the track that led from the valley platforms to the flitter park.Such a well-worn way would convince Kosgro at once.

But there was nothing—save faint indications that such a cut had once existed. I had made no mistake—this was where Bartare and her brother had left and I had followed. Right over there was the rock on which I had left Lazk Volk's recorder. But not only was that box gone, but the rock—when I looked for it—had vanished.

"Kilda, where's the road? What happened to the road?" Oomark cried.

"Yes, where is this road?" Kosgro sounded triumphant, as if he were proving his point. Yet I had sighted too many still unchanged landmarks to be mistaken. And if one looked closely enough, the remains of the road were still visible.

"The road ran there. And you can still see part of it! There! There! There!" I stabbed my finger to indicate the places. But that it had changed from the well-marked way to this was very hard for me to accept.

"I want to go home, please, Kilda!" Oomark sounded frightened.

"We'll go down to the flitter park." I took his hand. "This way." Resolutely I slipped and slid to that faint gash that should be our link with civilization. Not far now—just two turns more—

My feet hurt. The rocks, so different from the turf of the gray world, cut through the flimsy sandals. But I hobbled on.

The flitter park—yes, the remains of it! But no craft stood on the cracked surface, its edge roughly scalloped where chunks of it had broken away. It had been hardly used, and there were no attempts at repair. How could this happen in just *days?* It all looked as if years had passed since anyone walked here.

The ranger station was only a shell. The roof had crashed into the interior; the building was plainly derelict and must have been so for some time. I think I must have cried out, not being able to believe, yet aware that this was no dream. It was as real as the wind blowing about me, the grit that chafed my feet.

A warm hand slipped under my elbow to steady me. I clutched at Jorth Kosgro, clung to him, just as Bartare and Oomark had clung to me.

"Please!" My voice was small and frightened, too. "What, oh what has happened? This—this was the park, that the station. It was, I tell you, it was!"

"There is only one explanation. I didn't want to believe it. But you're right. This was once just what you say it was."

"Then what has happened, what *did* happen to change it? We can't have been away for more than a few days—"

His arm was about my shoulders, and the warmth and strength so near to me was steadying. I shook uncontrollably, and I felt as if I would never be warm again.

"There is another part to those tales from old Terra—the ones about the changelings and the world of the Folk. I didn't really think of that before. Now it seems that it must be true also—"

"What—what do you mean?"

"That some of those who went or were taken into that gray country did return after what seemed a day, or a month, or perhaps a year. But when they came to their own place again, they discovered that years or centuries had passed—"

"No!" Such a thing seemed utterly beyond reason. I closed my eyes and refused to look at the desolation about me, to believe that it was indeed the work of time and that we had been lost for years upon years.

Then he held me a little away from him, his hands heavy on my shoulders. He even gave me a small shake as if to summon my full attention, so that I was forced to open my eyes and meet his level, penetrating stare.

"Kilda, when you entered the gray world—what was the date—galactic, not planet time?"

"It was—it was the year 2422 After Flight—"

"The year 2422," he repeated. "But, Kilda, when *I* planeted here, the year was 2301 After Flight."

"One hundred twenty-one years earlier! I don't believe it!" I wanted to deny it, I had to! Yet when I looked about me, the evidence was plain. Now I met his eyes fearfully. "What—what can it be now, then? How long?"

"We cannot find out here—that is certain. We shall have to reach some settlement."

"They didn't reach this far." I ran my tongue over suddenly dry lips. "We are a long way from Tamlin without a flitter."

"But not from my ship," he countered. "And even a hundred and twenty-one years will have had little effect on a Survey scout. Let us go."

I was willing enough. The less I saw of this place, the better, until I could adjust to the thought that time had been our enemy. But I saw Kosgro as a young man, tired and worn-looking certainly, but young. And the

children, they were as they had been when we had gone through the gate. My own skin was smooth, with no sign of age. I ran my fingertips over my face. I could not be sure, but by touch the skin there was as smooth and unfurrowed as that of my hands and arms.

"Where do we go?"

"Back there—"

"Kilda, where are the flitters? Why is this all broken?" Oomark broke in. "I want to go home."

Bartare rounded on him. "There are no flitters, and maybe no city," she shrilled. "It's all, all gone! You would come back—now see what's happened!"

"Stop it!" For the first time in a long period I spoke to her harshly. "We are not sure of anything, Bartare. Oomark, we shall go to Kosgro's ship. Perhaps he can take us in that, or else his scouting flitter, back to Tamlin."

But though we tramped at a faster pace, all of us being eager to reach the ship, we did not find it. Instead, we came to an open space, and there Kosgro stopped short, swinging about, plainly looking for landmarks. When he turned to me and spoke, his voice was dull and empty of emotion.

"It is gone."

"I know. It is in the museum park at Tamlin."

We both looked to Oomark. "What?" "How do you know?" Our questions intermingled.

"'Cause when Gentlehomo Largrace flew our class out here, he made a swing over here to tell us about the mystery ship. When the settlers first came, they found a scout finned down here. It had been here a long time, 'cause it had a shape they didn't use any more. But they never found out anything about it—it was locked. So finally they moved it in town to the museum. He promised to take us to see it on our next observe trip."

"If it's in the city, we'll have to go there."

"How? We have no supplies, and it is a long trek through wilderness country to the nearest holding, if the holdings are still here."

"Do we have any choice now?" he asked, and I knew he was right. We did not—save of dying where we stood. And tired as we were, that was not our choice of an ending.

The rest of that nightmare passage exceeded anything we had faced in the gray world. Not that we were menaced by monsters out of a mist, but hunger was our constant companion. Kosgro used his survival training, and it was only his skills that kept us alive.

We lived on meat from animals he snared, brought down with a well-aimed rock or knocked over with a club. He fought animals and birds for berries that were already half dried up. The rags of our clothing became tatters that did not cover us, and we wove very perishable substitutes out of grasses and reeds. Our feet grew sore and then slowly toughened, and we lost all track of time, save we could count the days since we had first found the ruined ranger station.

And in all that time we saw no flitters, no evidence there were still any of our kind on this world. I could not think what had happened. When I had left Dylan, there had been a small but steady flow of emigration. More and more plantations and grazing land had been in use each year. Now we several times saw herd animals but quickly learned to avoid them. They had gone totally wild and were smaller, more wiry, and very alert, as if they had learned to defend themselves in order to survive.

On the twentieth day of our wandering, we came to the first sign that man had once tamed part of this land. Tangled vines grew around a hill, and the fruit they bore still hung in dry and withered bunches, decimated by birds and insects, plainly never harvested. We broke the shrunken, wrinkled things to eat. They were bitter and much smaller than the ones I remembered, but they were food, and we not only ate our fill, but also made bags of leaves pinned together with thorns to carry some with us.

The vines had overwhelmed and half buried buildings. So entangled and covered were those walls that

we did not try to get inside. It was evident nothing remained we could use.

But even with this evidence of the collapse of civilization on Dylan, I held to the hope that there was still a city, a port. If we could reach that, we would find people—if not those we had left—how *long* ago?—then still people.

Oddly enough, the farther we traveled, the more Bartare lost whatever she had brought with her out of the gray world, the more she became a normal child. Though Oomark had asked troubled questions at first, he, too, came to accept this strange thing that had happened. And I thought that both, being young, could better adapt than could Kosgro and I. For me it was an endless nightmare, and I struggled to wake from it.

Luckily for my sanity and perhaps for Kosgro's equilibrium also (though by the nature of his training he was better prepared to meet strange strokes of fortune), the very mechanics of keeping alive and moving and seeing to the well-being of the children filled our days. But I nearly broke as we worked our way through more of the derelict and overgrown holdings and came to the outskirts of Tamlin.

Here the too luxuriant vegetation had not yet wreaked so great a havoc. The houses stood intact, though here and there a roof was missing, or there were other signs of long neglect and abandonment. It would seem that through some chance or disaster Dylan had been left to silence and emptiness. We came to the house we had left to go to the valley. I went into the courtyard to face closed doors. Hesitatingly I called. As I expected, there was no answer. Still I went to open the door of Guska's room. It was empty even of furniture.

"Kilda—it's all gone—my clothes—my byny shell—everything! It's all gone!" Oomark came running from the room that had been his. Bartare had not even tried her door. She stood by the dried pool.

"Of course it is!" Some of her old impatience was

back in her voice. "Everything's gone—it's been gone a long time!"

Perhaps the meaning of all we had seen had not really struck Oomark until that moment. He turned very pale. Then he went to Kosgro, and his voice shook as he asked, "It's real then—we've been away a long, long time?"

Kosgro made no attempt to soothe. Instead, he answered him as he might a much older boy or man. "It's real, Oomark."

"I wish—I wish they had left my byny shell," he said. "Father, he had it when he was a little boy. He wanted me to keep it always. I just wish they had left that."

He walked slowly out toward the gate before he turned to ask, "If there's no one left here, what are we going to do?"

"We haven't been to the port yet. If there is anyone left, that is where we should find him—or them."

We did not visit any of the other houses. Now we hurried along the streets of the city. And there was only silent ruin about us as we passed.

So we came to the apron of the landing site. No ships stood down there. I had not expected that they would. The burn scars left by deter landing rockets still marked the field, but those could remain visible for years.

"Headquarters tower." Kosgro spoke as if to himself and headed purposefully across the end of the burned apron to that building which had been the heart of an active port, filled with computers and com devices. Perhaps if we *had* been abandoned here—my spirits took a sudden leap—there would still be some off-world com left working so we could summon help from the stars.

I quickened pace, and the children began to run, keeping up with Kosgro's lengthening strides. We reached the central door of the tower—to find it closed. But the admittance circuit was still working, and it opened for us.

Kosgro called out—his voice seeming a thunderous shout in that place—"Anyone here?"

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A moment later I wished that he had not made that call, for his voice echoed so hollowly, coming back in an eerie moan. I did not expect any answer, so I was startled.

The words "Who's there?" in an authoritative demand came out of thin air. For a moment I could believe we were back in the gray world where such happenings were not extraordinary.

"Scout Kosgro and party," my companion returned. Then he went to one of the inter-com screens and fingered the controls so that we would appear on any open screen in the building.

I heard a muffled exclamation and then, "Flight deck lookout. Take the grav and come up."

A door slid back in the right wall to display the open shaft of a grav. We stepped in, caught by the energy beam, and were carried aloft. Inside me a tight pressure band relaxed. So we were not alone on Dylan after all. Whatever had happened since we went on that fatal expedition to the valley had been drastic, but at least it had not finished off our species here.

The grav deposited us on the lookout of the tower. As soon as the door slid back, we saw three men awaiting us. But there were no familiar faces among them. I realized my hope of seeing Commandant Piscov, who would believe our story because of the very fact we did appear now, had been a foolish one.

The trio were not young, and they were in uniform.

But their tunics were patched and threadbare. Two had the insignia of planet militia, the third was a ranger. They had lasers ready, which they restowed in their belt rings as we stepped out.

"Who are you?" the leader asked.

"First-in Scout Jorth Kosgro, Kilda c' Rhyn, Bartare and Oomark Zobak." Kosgro answered for us all.

"Your ship—where did it crash?" The ranger pushed forward a little. "Are you refugees?"

"By the look of them they are near beat." The officer waved the other back. "They can do with food, I would imagine. Sit down. And, Brolster, bring out the rations."

So we found ourselves sitting in the places for those monitoring in and out space ships, eating such food as I had almost forgotten existed. Whatever had changed here, they still had ever-heat containers full of what must be savored slowly bite by bite.

However, when my first sharp hunger was satisfied and I looked around that chamber, I could see it was not a working place any longer. Many of the devices were shrouded and sealed in protecto, as if they had not been used for a long time. In fact, only the tall ledge of buttons and levers, before which the man who had introduced himself as Section Commander Weygil had taken his seat, appeared to be in use.

His companions were Patrolman Brolster and Ranger Cury, Cury being the one who eyed us almost as if he held some suspicion concerning our purposes here.

"You did crash, didn't you?" Weygil asked when we finished the food.

But before Kosgro could answer, Oomark went over and put one of his small, much scratched, and grimy hands on the section commander's arm.

"Please, where is everyone? They—they were all here—yesterday—" He looked back to me. "Was it yesterday, Kilda? How long were we in that place?"

"I don't know." A time long enough to frighten me if I allowed myself to dwell upon it, I guessed.

"What—" Cury interrupted impatiently.

Then once more Weygil held up his hand. "Not now!" he ordered, before he gave Oomark a gentle, encouraging smile. "The people have gone, son, most of them. Did you have someone here you wanted to see?"

"Mother—she was sick. And there was Randulf and his poohka Griffy, and Gentlehomo Largrace, and Commandant Piscov—"

At that last name I saw Weygil's eyes narrow and knew he had recognized it.

"And you expected to find them all here?"

"Sure. They were here—everybody was here when we went to the valley. And now—everything's different. All our things are gone out of the house. Even my byny shell Father gave me—everything!"

"It's been forty years since Commandant Piscov was transferred," the patrolman said in a low voice. "His name was in the records we sealed last week. Forty years!"

"What was the date—when you went to the valley?" Weygil asked Oomark.

Oomark frowned a little and glanced at me. "Kilda, when was it?"

I did not want to tell them, but I had no choice. "The fourth of Adi, 2422 After Flight."

They stared at me. I saw incredulity and then suspicion on two faces. Only Weygil appeared unmoved.

"This," he said slowly, "is the twenty-first of Narmi, 2483, After Flight."

"No!" Perhaps it was my cry of horror that convinced them.

Cury's hand had gone back to the butt of his weapon. But at my cry his fingers relaxed. I had suspected, but I had not been sure. More than fifty years! Yet I felt no older, the children looked no older than when we had gone into the gray world. Then I remembered—for Jorth it was now more than one hundred and eighty years!

"It's a trick!" That was Cury. "They're spies sent to trick us." He drew his laser and pointed it at Kosgro,

probably deeming the scout the most dangerous of our company.

"Listen!" Weygil had been studying us, but he spoke to Oomark.

"You went to school here?"

"Of course!" Oomark was impatient. "I was in the fourth group—with Randulf and Furwell and Portus—"

"Who else?" Weygil prompted as he paused.

"Well, Randulf and Furwell and Portus—they were my friends. But there were some girls—and there was Buttie Navers and Cleeve. Why—his name was the same as yours! He was Cleeve Weygil! Is he your little boy? He never said his father was a soldier—"

"He wasn't," the section commander answered slowly. "Cleeve Weygil was my older brother."

Oomark shook his head. "He couldn't be. He's a little boy like me and you—you're an *old* man!"

"They've been planted, filled up with a wild story and planted!" Cury broke in again. "Probably sent to beam in some snake-landing party. Best burn them right now."

"Be quiet!" This time Weygil's bark was sharp. "Oomark Zobak, his sister Bartare, and Kilda c' Rhyn." With his forefinger he pointed to each of us in turn. "But—I remember now! They searched for months and never found any trace of you. The matter was only dropped when the war broke out. After that no one had any time."

"What war?"

He told us, and his voice sounded as if he were aging years in the setting out of facts as the few remaining on Dylan knew them. There had been the sudden attack of an alien task force aimed at outer ring worlds. That had been defeated in a battle near the Nebula, but it was only the beginning. The destroyed force was but a scouting arm for a vast armada. Raids and more attacks followed. When the strangers were finally beaten, this whole section of the galaxy, once civilized,

had been left in a state of chaos in which the strong lived and the weak were swiftly gone. There was no communication left between separate solar systems, even between worlds. Strange diseases spread deliberately or by chance left some planets charnel houses.

Dylan had been hurriedly evacuated by all save a guard force in the third year of the war. For a while the field here at Tamlin had served as a refitting station for smaller fighting ships. Then ships ceased to come. Five years ago the small garrison sent out their own last scout ship to discover what had happened. It had never returned. Luckily, there was still a huge dump of supplies housed in warehouses around the port.

The holdings, the grazing lands, had early slipped back into the wild. The few remaining families on Dylan had withdrawn to one quarter of the port and were housed in buildings set aside for the military command. They still kept up a constant monitoring for off-world coms, hoping to pick up news. Only they had heard nothing at all for a long time.

"Now," Cury said as Weygil finished his somber report, "where *did* you come from? Are you refugees? Or plants sent in to take over?"

Bartare had come to me. Now her hand slipped into mine. The spell that had held her in thrall was gone. She needed what little reassurance I could give her.

"Go on!" Cury urged. "Where did you come from? And don't tell me out of time fifty years back! If you were sent in by some raiders, it won't do you any good. We have repulse fields working still, and we'll see you don't turn them off!"

"Kilda?" Kosgro spoke to me. Perhaps he thought I might be more readily believed, though the more I thought of our tale, the more impossible I knew it sounded. However, we had nothing to offer but the truth. And that I told them, cutting my narrative to the bare facts as they had happened to me, to Oomark,

and to the rest of our small company. Even so, the telling seemed to take a long time and to sound very strange.

When I was done, Weygil spoke first. "Another space-time continuum linked at intervals with other worlds," he said.

"You mean—you believe them?" demanded Cury.

"The theory is known," his superior returned. "And it fits what I do know about the disappearance of these three." He gestured to the children and me. "What about you?" He spoke to Kosgro. "When did you enter that world and how?"

Once more Jorth told of his planeting as a First-In Scout, of his accidental entrapment in the gray world, and of the year when that happened.

"The year *2301!*" Cury's disbelief was sharp.

"Yes, 2301," Kosgro repeated. "And I think I can furnish you with proof. Oomark says that a scout ship was discovered here and moved to a local museum. You all know the peculiarity of those craft. They are on special personna lock and will open only for the one who sets that. If the ship is still here—it will open for me and no one else."

I had forgotten that safeguard of a scout ship. Not only could it be placed on personna lock at planeting, so it could not be entered and could serve as a refuge for the scout if the need arose—but inwardly it was constructed so that its engines responded to one man alone, he who was signed to it. There was no better way for Jorth to prove his identity than to enter that ship.

"Museum?" Weygil repeated, and then excitement colored his voice. "Of course, it would still be there. There would be no reason to move it."

"Then take us there—now!" Kosgro urged.

"Stay with the com," Weygil ordered Brolster. They kept a day-night watch, hoping some whisper out of space would tell them one day they were not wholly forgotten.

We descended the grav and came out on that apron

seared by rocket fire, but which had not felt that hot breath for years. We did not walk back to the ghost city. Weygil had a ground car parked nearby, and though it was small, we all crowded in. The sound of our passing echoed far too loudly as we sped along the empty streets. And I liked less and less the look of those blank windows and the dust and dried leaves and wind-blown debris that drifted about the buildings. So well built were they that they might well stand here not fifty years, but a hundred—more—a monument to a dead colony. And how many more such worlds swung around suns, some without even a handful of inhabitants to pass through echoing cities? Some must have been burned off and remained dead cinders, others been visited by plagues that left unburied dead lying where they fell. I tried not to think of that. Let me concentrate on the fact that if we had come back to a largely empty world, it was one we knew and not that gray monster-ridden one that had held us prisoners.

Finally we drew up before a two-story building. Pointing skyward beyond it was the nose of a ship poised on its fins, ready to seek its element—space. It was far smaller than the liner that had brought us to Dylan, than even a medium-sized free trader. But it was a ship, and seeing it gave promise that with it mankind was not altogether exiled from the stars.

We passed through the outer court of the museum, Weygil burning off locks with his laser, hurrying on to the outside enclosure that held the scout ship. Kosgro trotted ahead to stand at the foot of one of the fins, dwarfed by the tall rise of the ship, small though it might be for a star traveler. For a moment he surveyed it. Then he spoke aloud, slowly. His words were meaningless to me, yet I knew they must be a lock phrase, some sentence he had set in as a signal.

As easily as if it had been only an hour ago that he left it, a hatch opened on the side. Through that came the boarding ladder, thudding on the pavement at the scout's feet. He grasped it, ready to climb aboard when Cury moved, throwing himself in a tackle that did not

carry Kosgro to the ground, but rather pinned him to the ladder. I think he was so startled by that attack that he did not struggle.

It was Weygil who cried out. "Cury! What are you doing? He's proved his point. He certainly is the man he said he was. The ship would not have answered him otherwise."

"Don't be a fool!" shouted the other. "He's a pilot. This is a ship which may be navigable. He can take off—leave us! Leave us to go on rotting—" Cury's face was a mask of fury. "He's not going to take off and leave us!"

Kosgro fought now. What he did to the man pressing him to the ladder I did not see, but suddenly Cury reeled away and back. The scout faced him, his bare hands poised in formalized invitation to unarmed combat. Cury reached for his laser, but the weapon was at the wrong angle for a quick draw, and Kosgro sprang, chopping a blow with the side of his hand at the other's neck. The ranger slumped at the foot of the ladder. Kosgro rounded on Weygil, his hands ready for defense.

"Relax. I'm not Cury." Weygil was calm. "Did you kill him?"

Kosgro was surprised. "No. Why should I?"

"He would have killed you." The section commander produced a tangler and showed some skill in spinning a restraining cord about Cury's wrists, binding them firmly together.

"More than Tamlin has changed." He did not look at us while he spoke. "We are too few. We have waited too long. For some of us that is not too difficult. We made our adjustments long ago. Others, by their temperament, cannot live with what is left. Cury is ridden by the belief that if we can only make off-world contact, Dylan will come to life again. He cannot accept the fact that no one off-world has tried to contact us, which either means that we no longer have anything to offer or there is no one left who remembers we are here."

Weygil sat back on his heels. "He is secure now. I'll

take him back to the barracks, give him a chance to cool down. By the way—*is* your ship operable?"

"I can see." Kosgro swung up the ladder and vanished through the hatch. It seemed a very long wait for us. Oomark drew close on one side, Bartare on the other.

"Kilda," the boy asked, "where are we going to live? There's no furniture, nothing in our house any more."

Weygil smiled at him. "Don't you worry about that, son. We have a home for all of you. I've a young grandson about your age, and there're a couple more like him in the barracks, some girls, too," he added, for Bartare's benefit. "Our families chose to stay, and we're not badly off. There're fifty of us, and we have the resources of a whole city, plus about a hundred bursting warehouses, to see us clothed, fed, and taken care of."

"Colonies have spread planet-wide," I observed, "from less seed."

"Very true. Most of us realize that. We go through the motions of standing watch at the port. Some of us, like Cury, have to believe that the situation is only temporary. The rest—" He shrugged. "We don't cherish false hopes. We have a lot, a great deal more than many ship-crash survivors who have started out on a new world. And we're growing—ten of our company are children, with more on the way. We'll make out."

With Sector Commander Weygil in charge, they probably would. But what about us—where would we fit in? Were we again doomed to be Between, neither of one world or the other?

Kosgro appeared on the ladder. As he reached the pavement the ladder was drawn up swiftly and the hatch clanged shut.

"It's operable—but it needs a new fuel core. That's exhausted."

"Good enough. Now—let's get back to the barracks. Brolster will have been on the com to the rest, and they will be impatient to meet you.

Cury was still unconscious as they packed his limp

body into the ground car. Once more we drove through those silent streets, heading back to the port and the barracks buildings flanking it on one side.

A mixed group was waiting to greet us with excitement. Bartare, Oomark, and I were swept off by the women. I had forgotten the sheer delight of soaking in a fresher, losing the grime left by long days of tramping, standing in spray that healed my scratches and bruises. To look in a mirror again was strange; to put on whole garments, lightly scented, which Weygil's daughter offered me—that was wonderful. To know that I was no longer weighted by the fears and responsibilities that had burdened me—that was the best of all!

Our story was a wonder almost as great for our listeners (for we told it now in detail) as their history was for us. With Weygil urging, though it would never now reach Lazk Volk's library (How had Chalox fared—was Volk's collection still intact, to be drawn upon by whatever civilization still existed?), I began to record our story in full. Then I got Oomark to add his part, but when I approached Bartare, she did not even answer at first.

Though she did not keep to herself as she always had when with her contemporaries before, yet neither was she completely akin to Alys or Wensie in the barracks. She gazed a little beyond me when I asked for the second time, "Will you do it, Bartare? You know so much more than we of the world of the Folk—"

"Why should I?" she asked flatly.

"Because it is knowledge, and all knowledge should be preserved for the future." I gave Lazk Volk's creed in which I had been trained as a girl.

"They think it is a story." She made a gesture to include the inhabitants of the barracks. "A lot of them want to believe it is. In a little while that is what it *will* be, just a strange story. Who is going to care about your record anyway? Your Lazk Volk will never hear it. He must have been dead for a long time now."

"Very well. I can only ask you, Bartare. I can't make you."

Then the mask she wore shattered. "She doesn't come any more," Bartare said in a whisper. "She will never come again!"

"Melusa?" But I did not need confirmation. I knew of whom she spoke.

"She—she said I couldn't reach her, back there on the mound—and I couldn't. So I never was her real daughter—never at all!" The words came faster and faster. "I always had her before—now I haven't anyone!"

"You have me, truly. Bartare, you have me!" I offered what I could.

She shook her head. "You want to do that, Kilda—give me something because you are sorry for me, because you feel you should take care of me. But you can't. You are you, and I am I, and we are too different."

She was putting into words what I had always felt.

"No. She won't ever be back again, Kilda. And already I've forgotten so much. I lie awake at night and try to remember the call words and the things I used to do to make this or that happen. But they are slipping out of my head. And pretty soon this will just be a story to me, too. When that time comes, I hope I won't care any more. That's the worst, Kilda, in a way—to hope that I won't care!"

She took my hand. "Don't ask me to record, Kilda, because if I do, then maybe someday I'll want to read it. And I'll remember a little bit, but never enough, never enough!"

I understood. Bartare had made her choice, since in the gray world another had been made for her. If she must put aside all that that had meant to her, she must do it now. So I never asked her again, though there was much that might have gone into record had she agreed. I though what pleasure it would have given Lazk Volk. But, as she had baldly said, he was not able to have it now.

From that time Bartare was more and more like the other children, perhaps trying consciously to be so at first. But soon there was no apparent strain in what she did. Her one-time unseen companion was long gone.

No, it was not Oomark or Bartare who could not join fully in the life of Dylan's tiny colony. I was the one. I was more than fifty years out of step, and I could not catch up, though I believed honestly that I tried as hard as Bartare to fit myself into the society of which I was now a member. I had thought that when I returned from the gray world, everything would be all right. Now I found that false.

Weygil kept me busy as a recorder for the official tape banks to be sealed at the port. If the colony did not survive (and there was always the shadow over us that a sudden epidemic, a raid, some natural catastrophe might wipe us out), then our records would be protected for generations to come. But this activity could not occupy all my hours.

As a lone woman I was courted and pressed hard for marriage by five of the unattached men of the company. And I knew that sooner or later I would be forced into the mold of the others of my sex on Dylan—husband, children, a narrowing of the future. And I could not yet accept that. I strove to hold off the need for a final decision for a while yet.

In the meantime, Jorth worked on his ship. Fuel cores existed in plenty in the warehouses but were meant to be fitted into warships. It meant a long and delicate task to shave one down for the refitting in the much smaller scout. He was given every aid the colony could offer, for they saw in him their last chance to establish contact off-world. As Weygil had told us, a goodly portion of the colony did accept matters as they were, had given up hope of stellar contact, and were using their energy to make the best of that around them. But there were others not so resigned.

Cury, from wanting to fight Kosgro, became his most eager aide. I could guess that the ranger was determined to be in the ship when it finally lifted.

In the meantime, I saw very little of my late companion. He worked hard, and when he returned to the barracks, it was mainly to eat and sleep. But the climax of both of our problems came on the same day.

Matild, Weygil's wife, took me aside in midmorning and spoke her mind bluntly. I was a matter of discord. There had been a fight between two of the unattached men, neither of whom I favored. In fact, I had been most careful, once I knew the situation, not to favor any one of them, staying among the women all that I could. But the mere fact that I had made no selection was becoming a source of trouble. Since it was necessary for the good of the whole colony, this must not occur. I must choose at once.

That she spoke good sense, and that it was best for the group, I could not deny. Yet that I would be forced to do this—my inner rebellion was such that I went out of the barracks and into the silent city. Where I went did not matter. I wandered up one street and down the next. There were five unattached men, and to none of them was I in any way drawn. I did not feel part of the colony. I did not want to mingle my future with theirs.

I paused in the garden of the house that had been Commandant Piscov's in the old days. The untended growth was a tangle that had long ago broken out of the formal beds in which it had been planted. The weaker things had been smothered out of existence, but the ranker and hardier ones flourished. They had fought for life, and in them I read a lesson. It was fair and peaceful. I only wished I could stay there, forgetting all outside the half-open gate.

A metallic clicking aroused me. Startled, I thought that perhaps one of my persistent suitors had trailed me. But it was Jorth who stood there.

He wore a uniform from the warehouse stock. His space boots with their magnetic plates had caused the clicking. But his tunic was unsealed, and his hands were red from much scrubbing to remove the last traces of the work he had been doing.

"I saw you come here—on the ship's visa-plate," he said, almost as if he were accusing me. "She's ready to lift."

"They'll be excited."

"They don't know. They think I still have a day—two days—"

"Why?"

He did not answer. Instead, he walked to me. His freshly scrubbed hands fell on my shoulders in a grip tight enough to be painful, yet one I welcomed gladly. And he drew me up, close to him. Then he looked into my eyes squarely, and I knew there was no more need for words between us—this was what I had been seeking and needed.

"You'll come." That was not a question, but I answered as if it was.

"Yes!" And then I added, "When?"

"Now. I have supplies on board. Cury helped."

"He thinks to go."

Kosgro shook his head. "I made no promise. There is only one I would take from here. I'll carry their message. That I would have done in any case. And, Kilda, I do not know what waits out there. If we rise into complete chaos such as Weygil thinks exists—then it may be far worse than anything you can imagine."

"After the gray world, nothing can be worse."

"We can't take the children."

"No. But they have chosen their own way. Oomark is happy here. And I think Bartare will be. She has lost that dread companion who urged her to other ways."

"But you have found one—though perhaps not a dread one. And I shall urge you—"

I laid my fingers on his lips. "You urge me to nothing! I, too, have chosen. Where you go, there will I be also, even unto the end of all stars!"

So it was we slipped through the dead city to the

ship. And Jorth brought me into the only home he would ever own, which was to be mine thereafter. Gladly did I exchange the safety of Dylan for whatever might await the two of us beyond.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andre Norton, born Alice Mary Norton, has long been regarded as one of the best writers of science fiction and fantasy. She was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and began her literary career as editor of her high school paper. Before the age of twenty-one she had published her first book.

After attending Case Western Reserve University, she became a member of the staff of the Cleveland Public Library in the Children's Department. Failing health caused her resignation and she then became a full-time writer.

In 1979 she was awarded the BALROG for professional writers in the fantasy field. She has also been awarded the Phoenix, the Invisible Little Man award, and a plaque from the Netherlands government for her past work.

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