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Flight From Yesterday by Robert Moore Williams

I

He was a private test pilot so long out of work that he was beginning to wonder about eating tomorrow. The ad was attractive. And interesting. He pulled it out of his jacket pocket and scanned it again.

HELP WANTED

Young man for dangerous work. Must pass rigorous physical and mental tests. Apply in person. No references needed.

Sitting in his car in the parking lot, Keth Ard studied the ad again. The *No references needed* tripped a warning signal in his brain. Employers who advertised that they needed no references rarely had the welfare of their employees at heart. But the ad was intriguing. He had no objection to danger. In a way, danger had always been his life. And money was low. He turned his attention to Beacon Street.

The street was not impressive. Nor was the neighborhood. This was Old Los Angeles that had come into existence before the Space Age had been thought of by anybody except science-fiction writers and readers. The Space Age had boomed outward and had left this spew of wreckage behind it as a shamble of buildings and of lives. This was a place where nobody cared any longer, for buildings or for men. Old stores alternated with two- and three-story apartment buildings displaying For Rent signs. At the repair garage on the far corner was a sign: Atomic Power Units Replaced Here. A drugstore was on the corner directly across the street. The sign here said Sleep With Buda. Buda was the newest tranquilizer for which no prescription was needed.

The young woman with the red hair and the green dress came out of this drugstore. She walked with a twisty stride that would catch the eye of any man anywhere. Her stride caught Keth Ard's eyes. But it was the face that held his gaze.

It was a haunted face, if he had ever seen one. He had seen one—his own—the last time he had looked into a mirror. The horror that had been in his own mind—and on his face—was on her face too. It was the horror that only those who flee from yesterday can know, the horror known by those who are haunted by some lost memory that will neither come to consciousness and be dissolved nor will let go without recognition but which remains as a gnawing canker inspiring doubt and despair in the depths of the subconscious mind, a lost memory of failure somewhere, of pain sometime, of horror presumed to be gone from the real world which remains somewhere in the hidden depths of the mind.

Keth Ard knew the meaning of this kind of haunting. During the past four months, after he had been dismissed from his job as a test pilot for a private company, he had spent most of his time and money searching for something hidden in the depths of his own mind. He had sought help from a psychiatrist, a willing, learned, and able man. Neither psychogenic drugs nor hypnosis had enabled them to find the lost yesterday that was haunting him.

They were still looking.

"We'll find it eventually, Keth," Dr. Riker, the psychiatrist still insisted. "No memory out of the past can lick both of us."

Was the young woman in the green dress also searching for a lost memory? If this was true, she had Keth Ard's instant sympathy. He got out of the car and walked down the street behind her. He had no intention of speaking to her or of following her. He was simply going in the same direction.

She went into a curio shop.

Keth stopped in front of the shop. He checked his ad again. The address given in the advertisement was that of the curio shop—1313 Beacon Street! This was the place.

The two display windows, one on each side of the door, were draped so

that he could not see into the store. The door had a bamboo curtain behind the glass panel. In front of the shop, there was a sign.

J. Eller
CURIOS

The display window on the right of the door held reproductions of native art from around the world, all male. Sex as expressed in the male form was the main theme being displayed. Looking at the little bawdy statues, Keth wondered if the ad he was answering was going to turn out to be the sale of pornography. With the law being what it was, selling pornography could certainly be classified as dangerous work! The idea amused him; for an instant it lifted the haunted feeling in his mind. Turning his attention to the display window on the left of the door, he saw that the little statues displayed here were all female. To Keth, being a man, these were more interesting, though no less pornographic.

The man brushed past his right elbow. Keth was aware of movement out of the corner of his eyes, but was not aware of being touched. Startled, he turned quickly. Coming from the sidewalk, the man was moving toward the door of the curio shop. His head was shaved clean, he had a neatly trimmed beard on his chin, and he was wearing a blue toga which was caught over his left arm. On his bare biceps were twisted wires. His skin was the color of old ivory. Stretching his right hand toward the door of the curio shop, he seemed almost unaware of his surroundings.

Keth instantly named him Blue Toga.

Blue Toga looked like a man who had walked out of a dream into the world of reality and was wondering about the strange place in which he found himself. The dream quality that Blue Toga displayed struck Keth Ard very strongly. Occasionally, Keth had partly awakened from sleep to find himself dreaming. Blue Toga looked as if he had been living in a dream and was awakening to find himself in a real world that was very confusing. His gait was that of a man in the grip of some drug. Or that of a man who had drunk too much. Or that of a man who had walked across some dimensional gulf and did not know what had happened to him. He glanced at Keth and did not seem to see him, then looked again as though he had seen something the first time and was rechecking, then looked the third time as if he did not believe what he had seen the first two times.

Blue Toga spoke.

Keth clearly saw the man's lips move. There was no sound of a voice.

"Sorry, but I didn't catch what you said," Keth said.

Blue Toga shook his head. He brought his eyes to focus on Keth's face, then looked down and up Keth's body. The impression on his face was that of a man who is seeing a ghost.

"Can I help you?" Keth asked. The thought in his mind was that this man was drunk and needed to be put into a cab and sent home.

Blue Toga stared at Keth.

And vanished!

Slid away like smoke before the wind, slid out of seeing, went out of sight, vanished into thin air, fled from the confusing world of reality back to the solid world of dreams!

Keth Ard stood very still. A shock wave leaped into existence at the base of his spine and raced upward to the middle of his brain, where it became a spot of cold. He was a rocket ship test pilot. Every time he had climbed into a new ship, he had looked at death. He had come to regard death as an eternal companion, almost as a friend. Until the moment when he saw Blue Toga vanish in front of the curio shop, Keth Ard had thought that he had no fear of the supernatural. Now he discovered that this was untrue. Like other men, he was afraid of things he did not understand. In his mind was the thought that Dr. Riker would be interested in Blue Toga. Or in his state of mind which had led him to believe he had actually seen a man wearing a blue toga and had seen this man vanish before his eye. Dr. Riker would probably call this a hallucination and say it was the result of an overworked imagination.

Keth Ard did not like this thought. Trouble with an overworked imagination was what had taken him to Dr. Riker in the first place. Or so he had believed, only to discover that neither the psychiatrist nor he were quite sure where imagination left off and reality began. There was a fringe world which was sometimes real and sometimes imaginary. The person who was in this fringe world was never quite sure which was which. Or so Dr. Riker had told him. Dr. Riker hadn't seemed too sure that even he knew which was which.

"I'm seeing things," Keth said. Sometimes, testing a rocket ship in the upper fringes of the atmosphere, he had seen things—colors and what had

looked to be strange ships. But he had never seen a man in a blue toga vanish before his eyes.

Lighting a cigarette, he told himself over and over again that what he had seen had come from his imagination. A part of him did not believe this, but he told himself again and again that it was true. He turned his attention back to the shop window. Eventually the part of him that believed it had seen a man in a blue toga grew calm. He also remembered the reason he had come here. No matter how many ghosts came or how many ghosts went, a man still had to eat. To do this, a man had to answer ads until he found a job. He went into the curio shop.

It was a place of shadows, of glass display counters running back on both sides, a place where the tang of incense was in the air, and a place of junk. Books, paintings, statues of all sizes, lamps, futuristic art work in copper, bronze, and in aluminum looked at him from all sides. The middle aisle leading to the rear of the shop was so crowded with junk as to be almost impassible. Art objects filled the show cases, overflowed from their tops. Shelves along both walls were filled. At the front of the store, on the counter at his left, an ancient cash register showed the No Sale sign.

So far as he could tell, the shop was untenanted. The redheaded woman in the green dress had disappeared. Had she been a ghost like Blue Toga or had she found her way along the crowded middle aisle to the rear of the store, to vanish through a doorway there?

Footsteps sounded somewhere. They started at the rear of the store and came toward him. Keth could hear them clearly, but he could not see the person who was making the sound. The footsteps came along the line of showcases on his left, reached the front of the store, and stopped there. At this point, Keth saw the man who had been making the footsteps. He had walked behind the showcases but he had not been tall enough to be seen over them. At the front of the store beside the cash register, a space about a foot wide was clear of junk. Keth realized that the face he saw there was that of the man who had walked to the front of the store.

The man was a dwarf. Just barely tall enough to see across the top of the counter, he was looking out at his customer. Keth took one look at the face peering at him. The sight of Blue Toga had been less unnerving than the sight of this dwarf.

The head of the dwarf was large and misshapen. Perhaps a birth injury

had twisted the skull out of shape and the bones had never righted themselves. A scar like a saber cut slanted across the forehead. The right eye was larger than the left eye. Both eyes looked appraisingly at Keth Ard. The right eye had cold suspicion in it. The right eye wanted no part of Keth Ard.

The left eye was friendlier. Because it was friendly, it seemed to be trying to warn Keth Ard of something, what he did not know. The right eye would not warn him. It was coldly suspicious of him. It wanted him to go away.

It was as if this dwarf had two minds. One mind used one eye, the other mind used the other eye. The two minds could not agree with each other. Nor could the two eyes.

"You want something?" the dwarf said. The voice was high, like that of a child, and grim, like the voice of a man, and cold, like that of a suspicious woman.

"You ran an ad in today's paper," Keth said.

"Yes," the dwarf said. He seemed to feel that this was all the talk that was required of him.

"I came in answer to the ad," Keth said.

"Oh," the dwarf said. He did not become more friendly, he did not become less friendly.

"Well?" Keth said.

"You'll have to wait," the dwarf said. "He's busy now."

"Oh," Keth said. "Who is *he*?"

"Ah—," the dwarf answered. "Ah. Mr. Eller. He ran the ad."

"Can you tell me about the work?" Keth asked.

"No."

The dwarf's tone of voice indicated that the talk was finished.

"A young woman came in here just ahead of me," Keth said.

"Oh?" the dwarf said. His voice was a question.

"She was redheaded and she was wearing a green dress." Keth said.

"I didn't see her," the dwarf said.

"Listen—" Keth began. He was going to speak firmly to this dwarf behind the counter, but before he could decide what he wanted to say, two men came through the back door. One was fat with legs so short he walked with a waddle. The other was bean-pole tall. The fat man had his hands in his coat pockets. The skinny man walked as if he was in a dream.

Keth stared at them. In his mind, he wondered if they were real. Or would they also vanish the way the man in the blue toga had done? The fat man in the lead, they were coming toward him. Neither seemed to be aware of his existence. He had to squeeze against the show case to let them pass. "You—you got permission to leave?" the dwarf demanded, as they passed him.

"You go to hell, Zandu!" the fat man answered, without turning his head.

They walked out of the shop. The fat man opened the door and went through it. The skinny man closed the door, as normal and as reasonable and as sane a performance as any one could wish.

"Friends of yours?" Keth asked the dwarf.

"No! I hate them! I hope they both fall into the beam of the *thegnar* and get burned to cinders!"

"Into the beam of the *what*?" Keth asked.

"Nothing," the dwarf answered. "Get the hell out of here!"

"What?" Keth said.

"Get the hell out of here," the dwarf answered.

"That's strong language you are using," Keth said. He made no move to obey. Instead he took a package of cigarettes from his jacket pocket. With

elaborate delay, he tapped a cigarette on his finger nail and rolled it on his lips before lighting it. The dwarf glowered at him.

"I suppose you wish I'd drop dead right along with your two friends who just left," Keth said.

"I ain't saying," the dwarf answered.

"It just happens that I came in here to answer an ad. I'm going to stay here until I talk to somebody about the job that was offered," Keth said.

"The job's taken," the dwarf said.

"It wasn't taken when I asked you the first time," Keth pointed out.

"It's taken now. You might as well get the hell on your way," the dwarf said.

"I have plenty of time, I'll wait," Keth said.

Both eyes of the dwarf got together. They united on a common objective, that they both hated Keth Ard. The eyes of the dwarf said that if wishing could kill a man, Keth Ard would soon be dead.

Hurried footsteps sounded in the rear of the shop. They were made by high heels going somewhere fast. Glancing toward the rear, Keth saw that the redheaded young woman in the green dress was responsible for these fast footsteps. She was moving along the cluttered aisle toward the front of the store and was heading straight toward the front door.

"*Ethan tu!*" A man's voice shouted, from the rear.

Keth caught a glimpse of a man with a hawk nose coming through the door. He was following the young woman. One glance had told him he was not likely to catch her and he had shouted at the dwarf.

Darting through a passage between the showcases, the dwarf tried to grab the young woman around the waist. Evading him, she ran toward the front door. Trying to get out of her way, Keth leaned against the showcase. Bumping into him, she tripped and started to fall. He reached out hastily and caught her by the shoulder.

His intention was to save her from a nasty fall. She hit him across the

face with the big purse she was carrying.

"Darn you! Let go of me!"

"Lady, I'm only trying to help—"

This got him a lick in the eye, from the hand that did not have the bag in it.

"Damn it, lady!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Keth saw that the dwarf was in action again. Like a tackler on a football field, he lunged forward and grabbed her around the waist.

Keth brought up one knee hard and fast. It caught the dwarf on the chin. Both eyes out of focus now, the dwarf stumbled backward.

Understanding at last that this man was trying to help her, the young woman flashed Keth a look of gratitude.

"*Ethan nashu tu!*" a voice shouted from the rear.

Looking toward the sound, Keth saw that Hawk-nose was rushing along the aisle toward them. His eyes were murderous.

"She's a thief!" Hawk-nose yelled. "Stop that woman!"

Keth moved fully into the aisle.

The dwarf, sprawling, was also in the aisle, almost blocking it.

"Get the hell out of my way, you fool!" Hawk-nose shouted. He kicked the dwarf in the face.

"Let's get out of here," the redhead said, behind Keth.

"Lady, you're making sense," Keth answered. "You go first. I'll slow the pursuit!"

As he heard her high heels on the floor, Keth saw Hawk-nose get past the dwarf. Then the man was reaching toward him with long arms.

Keth reached too, with a left jab for Hawk-nose's chin. The blow went home. The man's head was rocked backward. The left had been a light blow, intended to distract. The right, crossing to the stomach, had another purpose—to do the utmost possible in damage.

The right buried itself in the soft stomach. It did its work. Hawk-nose said "Oof!" and grabbed his stomach with both hands. Folding up like a jackknife, Hawk-nose started to go down.

Keth was a little startled. This man knew absolutely nothing of self-protection. Hadn't he ever watched a boxing match on TV?

"Come on!" the redhead yelled, from the door.

Keth backed out of the curio shop. Hawk-nose and the dwarf were in a tangle of arms and legs on the floor. Keth slammed the door of the shop and turned left to follow the redhead. She was already moving along the sidewalk.

The back of the green dress was smoking.

Keth's first dazed thought was that this was an optical illusion. The time was late afternoon. The sun was gone from the sky. It was just not possible for her dress to have caught fire. It couldn't happen.

But it was happening!

As he looked, he saw little flickers of flame appear in the green fabric. Simultaneously, as if she was just becoming aware of something happening, the young woman turned her head to look behind, slapping at her back as she did so. Her manner was that of a person startled by the bite of a strange insect.

She saw Keth, and smiled, then her gaze went past him along the street behind them. A look of horror appeared on her face. At the same time, the skin started to turn red.

Dropping to the sidewalk, she rolled into the gutter.

Keth took one startled glance along the street behind them. A tan panel truck with the back door open was parked on their side and down near the end of the block. The skinny man whom he had seen in the curio shop was

in the back end of the truck. He was huddled over something that looked a little like a miniature radar antenna.

So much Keth saw with one glance over his shoulder. At the same time, he was aware that smoke was rising from the back of his own jacket, that his back had suddenly grown uncomfortably warm. In the single glance over his shoulder, a blast hit him in the face. It felt like burning, electrified air.

Keth Ard threw himself into the gutter beside the redhead.

As he hit the gutter, he was aware that a tornado of wind had suddenly begun to roar along Beacon Street.

II

Down the street, the skinny man in the back end of the tan panel truck was trying to bring his radar antenna down so it would focus on them. No cars were parked between them and the truck, but there was a heavy manhole cover in the asphalt surface of the street just at the edge of the concrete curb. With one hand, Keth pulled the manhole cover from its resting place and lifted it into the gutter. It was like a shield from the old days of the planet, a shield before them to protect them from—what?

He did not know from what. Dim memories were tugging at his mind asking to be admitted but they were memories of what he had regarded as nightmares out of the wildest experience of his life. He wanted no part of them.

The redhead crawled up and lay beside him behind the manhole cover.

"What is this?" she shouted.

Keth shook his head.

"That man in the back end of the truck was in the back room of the curio shop," she continued.

"I know. I saw him and a fat man leave."

He had to scream to make himself heard. The tornado of wind blowing along the street was getting stronger. It was blowing pieces of paper high in the air, lifting the skirts of women, and causing cars to veer hastily

toward parking spots. Worst of all was the dust.

Holding the manhole cover in front of him, Keth Ard felt as if the dust would choke him. Worse still was a peculiar quality in the air itself. The tornado of air did not feel like air, it felt like electricity in motion. It carried with it a peculiar crackling sound like static electricity.

Through the dust on the street, Keth caught a glimpse of a red sports car veering toward the curb. Blinded by the dust and possibly burned in this devastating electrical wind, the driver had lost control of his car.

Keth shuddered and tried to dig into the gutter, an impossible task.

Down the street metal screamed as other cars collided.

Rubber screaming, the red sports car hit the curb directly in front of the manhole cover. Keth felt grateful. The sports car had added the weight of its metal to the shield before them.

The air that felt like moving, living electricity had to find its way under and around the sports car before it could get to them. The air kept coming.

Keth felt his head begin to spin. The street seemed to be dissolving. Just beyond the manhole cover, the sports car seemed to be twisting and squirming and bending in upon itself. He told himself firmly that this was distortion caused by the intense heat in this living air.

He knew he was lying.

Something was happening deep down inside him where the old memories are hidden.

The red sports car, the manhole cover, and Beacon Street vanished. Disappeared, went into nothing, slid out of existence the way a picture projected on a screen slides out of existence when another slide is slipped into place.

One thing remained: the howling, living, electrical air.

It was howling through the streets of another city, an incredible city built of low, flat-roofed dwellings, of streets that were really only narrow,

crooked lanes along which plodded beasts that looked like gaunt oxen pulling two-wheeled carts. People swarmed through this city; they walked along the streets or were borne in sedan chairs carried by slaves; they ran small shops. Dodging the slow-footed beasts that looked like gaunt oxen, children played games in the streets, or, if their parents were wealthy, they romped in gardens hidden behind high walls.

This city was not like a mirage that Keth Ard was seeing. It was *his* city, he lived in it, he belonged here. He was a young man of excellent physique, of good family, and he was going some day to marry a young woman who spent most of her time in a garden behind high walls.

The people of this city had skins the color of old ivory and they wore colored garments that looked like togas.

Behind high walls at the edge of this city a tower rose into the sky. Squat at the base, it became more and more slender as it rose to the top, where a circular, movable structure formed the apex.

The people of this city feared this tower. They feared the man who had built it, exceedingly. They feared the group of men around him.

Their fear was of a strange quality. It was not fear of death. The ending of life caused them no concern. It was something that came eventually to all. Penetrating the veil beyond the change called death, their wise and ancient priests had brought back stories of another kind of life waiting for them beyond the veil of man's passing. Their fear was of air that burned like liquid fire!

Someone was jerking at him.

"Wake up! Wake up!" someone was screaming.

The jerking at his arm and the voice screaming in his ear pulled him away from this strange city that existed no man knew where, brought him back to Beacon Street. The redhead was pulling at his arm and screaming at him.

The tornado of air had stopped howling down the street. The air was still full of dust and it still had the curious quality of being heavily charged with static electricity, but the burning feeling was gone from it.

Lifting himself on one hand, Keth looked over the top of a manhole cover and around the rear fender of the sports car.

The tan panel truck was moving. The back door was closed. As Keth watched, it spun around a corner on two wheels.

Along the street a curious silence held. The wind was dying. A man with his clothes on fire was desperately trying to beat out the flames with his hands. A woman with a burning dress was trying to help him. He could see three wrecked cars in one block. In the far distance a siren had begun to howl. Either the police or the fire department, or both, were coming.

The sign in front of the curio shop was still swaying. The paint on it looked as if it had been burned. Out of the door, the frightened face of the dwarf was peering. Both eyes of the dwarf were in agreement that this little man was scared almost to death. The face of Hawk-nose was visible above that of the dwarf. Hawk-nose was not really scared, but he was blistering mad. His eyes went up and down the street. His anger seemed to grow stronger. He became aware of two people lying in the gutter in front of his shop.

The glitter in his eyes grew stronger.

"Let's get the hell out of here!" Keth said.

The redhead needed no further urging. Instantly on her feet, she fled down the street. Keth Ard followed right behind her. He saw that the green dress was slipping away from her back. The cloth had charred to the point where it would no longer hold together. The bare skin of her back was red. He did not know how badly she had been burned. Feeling his own back itching, he realized he did not know how badly he had been burned either.

"Left into the parking lot!" he shouted at the young woman. She veered into the lot, then turned to look questioningly at him. He pointed at his car. She went into the bucket seat beside the driver without hesitation, he went behind the wheel. The stout little electric motors on each wheel surged with power as he turned the current into them. He went out the back exit of the parking lot and down an alley to the next cross street, where he turned left.

"We're going to a doctor," he said.

She nodded, "Yes. You need one."

"I need one?" he questioned. "You're the one who needs medical attention."

"So do you," she answered. "Your face is badly blistered and your coat is falling off your back."

At this point, Keth realized that the sleeves of his jacket were bunched around his wrists. He saw now that the cloth had pulled loose in the back and that only the front of the jacket was holding the sleeves in place. Twisting his head, he glanced at his own back. The cloth of his coat was charred. His sport shirt and his T-shirt were burned rags clinging to his blistered skin. Mashing on the accelerator, the motors howled at each wheel. Glancing at the redhead, he saw that she was setting her jaws against the pain in her own back.

"Do—do you know a good doctor?" she asked, falteringly.

"One of the best," he answered. "He's a psychosomatic specialist, that is, he treats both bodies and minds. Riker is his name. We're heading for his office now."

"Will he be in at this hour?"

"Yes. He lives above his office. We'll bang on his back door until he has to come down and open it."

"You were really trying to help me back there in that shop," the young woman said.

"Of course," Keth said. "What's your name?"

"Gael Dana. And—thanks."

"No thanks needed, Gael." He gave his own name.

"What—what happened back there, Mr. Ard?"

"I don't know. And you may call me Keth. You might as well, because I'm going to call you Gael."

"Good!" Something akin to pleasure lighted the pain-created tension on

her face. "I—I would like to talk to you, Keth, about that place and about what happened."

"We'll talk as soon as we get treated, talk all you want. Dr. Riker will want to hear our stories too. I—what happened there—" Keth's voice went into silence as grim thoughts came into his mind. "Did—did you, by any chance, while that blast of electrified air was sweeping past us, have the impression that the street had vanished and you were in an entirely different city, in another country, in a lost time?"

He put the question with reluctance. In his mind was the fear that Gael would think he was crazy for even thinking such thoughts. She turned instantly to stare at him from frightened eyes.

"What city? Describe it. Tell me about it."

He told her what he had seemed to see.

"All my life I have caught glimpses of that city!" she gasped.

"Do you mean that?"

"Of course I mean it."

"Then you don't think I'm crazy for seeing it?"

"Of course not!"

"Thanks," Keth said. Somewhere inside him, he knew her answer had relieved a tension in his mind. "If I may ask, what were you going in that curio shop?"

"I went in to ask about my younger brother," she answered. "He went there day before yesterday, to answer an ad."

"What happened to him?"

"That's what I was trying to find out," Gael Dana answered. "We share a small apartment. He just didn't come home."

"So you went looking?"

"Yes."

"Good girl. But didn't you go to the police?"

"No. In my family, we fight our own battles. We go to the police last, if we go to them at all. If I couldn't have found out anything about Jimmie in the curio shop, I would have gone to the police."

"Did you find out anything?"

"No. And yes."

"What do you mean by that answer?"

"I mean I didn't find out anything from Eller. He was with two men in the back room when I entered. A strange woman was just going upstairs. He sent the two men out the front—"

"I saw them leave," Keth said. He did not add that he had seen one of them in a tan panel truck.

"Eller absolutely denied he had seen my brother, that Jimmie had even been in the shop. Every word he spoke was a lie!" Vehemence sounded in her voice.

"How do you know he was lying?" Keth asked.

"Because this was lying on his desk!" Gael answered.

Opening her purse, she took from it a small piece of what looked to be smooth green stone. Worn smooth by much handling, it still showed very faint lines that were apparently the result of engraving once on the surface. The stone was perhaps an inch long and about half an inch thick.

Driving, Keth could only glance at it. Showing it to him for only a second, Gael quickly replaced it in her purse.

"We call this the Arthen Stone," Gael said. "It had been in our family for generations, how many no one knows any more, passing from father to son, maybe for thousands of years. We have always called it our good luck stone but in recent years it seems to have lost its ability to bring good luck. Anyhow, Jimmie has had nothing but bad luck recently. The worst bad luck of all was when he answered that ad, I'm afraid."

"He had the stone with him when he went to the curio shop?"

"Yes."

"Could he have sold it there? After all, this shop probably buys curios for resale."

"No!" Gael said, vehemently. "The Danas would sell their souls before they would sell the Arthen Stone."

"It doesn't look valuable," Keth commented.

"It isn't valuable, in money," Gael said. "Its value lies in the fact that for my family it is a link with the past, when we had more than we have today. Only Jimmie and I are left, Keth, all that remains of a once rich and powerful family."

The haunted look was on her face again. The impression of hidden pain was stronger though whether the pain came from the burns on her back, from anxiety about a loved younger brother, or from some hidden psychic trauma, Keth could not determine. Possibly it came from all three sources, one course intensifying and deepening the pain brought into existence by another.

These were questions that Dr. Riker could answer.

Keth turned into an alley beside an old building. A sign over the front door said Joseph Riker, M.D.

He wheeled the little car into a parking space at the rear of the building. A light was burning over the rear door. There was no sign on the door but beside the facing was a bell.

Keth pushed the bell button.

"Are you sure this is all right?" Gael asked, nervously. "I mean—should we try to tell him how we actually got these burns? If we tell him a crazy story like this, he may have us sent to an insane asylum."

"Not Dr. Riker," Keth answered. "Listening to impossible stories is his business. Helping the people who tell him such stories is his profession—and his gift."

"You sound as if you know him very well," Gael commented.

"He's my doctor," Keth answered.

"For your head?"

"Yes," Keth said bluntly.

At this, she drew a step back and stood looking closely at him. Doubt was in her mind. She did not know this man. She had met him under questionable circumstances. He had just admitted that he was under treatment by a doctor who was probably a psychiatrist.

"If you wish, I will take you to your own physician," Keth said quietly. "I am not urging you go in here with me. But I know Dr. Riker. He is competent and trustworthy. If you are worrying about me—"

She suddenly smiled.

"I *was* worrying about you, wondering how far I could trust you, but after what you just said, I'll go with you," she said.

Keth felt a warm glow at her words. Deep down inside, it felt good to be trusted and to be trusted by a woman as attractive as this redhead in the green dress, which was burned half off her back, felt doubly good.

"Thank you," Keth said.

"I like honesty and I like honest people," Gael said.

"Yes?" a voice said, from a hidden speaker above the door.

"Keth Ard, Dr. Riker, and a woman," Keth answered. "We want to see you right away. It's an emergency."

"I'll be right there, Keth," the voice answered from the speaker.

Inside, a lock clicked and the door opened. It seemed to Gael Dana that the face which looked out at them was that of an elderly, wise, and benevolent gnome out of some lost fairyland. The gnome blinked at them from weak eyes that seemed not only to be aware of the condition of their clothes, but also of the shock state that existed in the inner, private world of both.

"Come in, children," Dr. Riker said to them. "Come in and tell me what

you have been doing to get yourself in such dreadful condition."

III

Dr. Riker stripped the clothes from their backs and made them lie down on separate examining tables separated by a cloth screen in the biggest of the back rooms in his office.

"How'd you get this, Keth?" he asked.

"I was struck in the back by something that felt like a hot wind made in part of living electricity," Keth said.

Dr. Riker made no comment.

"No matter how you got it, my first job is to protect you from infection. This is an antibiotic spray I am going to use."

Keth felt the spray go on his back. Then Dr. Riker went behind the screen and used the spray on Gael.

"Now I am going to use another spray," Keth heard him tell Gael. "It will instantly form a film over the burns and protect them from further infection. New tissue will grow under this film. The film itself is tough enough so that both of you will be up and around tomorrow though neither of you will be running any foot races or playing any jumping games. Do you understand, young lady?"

"Yes, Dr. Riker," Keth heard Gael answer.

Then the gnome was back on Keth's side of the screen, spraying his back with the same film-forming spray.

"Now both of you are going to get a shot," Dr. Riker said. "It will contain a mild sedative which will keep your nerves from jumping straight through the film I have just put over your burns."

Keth felt the needle bite into his hip.

"How bad are these burns, sir?" he asked.

"They're not good," the physician answered firmly. He trotted around the curtain. Keth heard Gael's startled *yip* as another needle bit into some part of her anatomy.

"Your burns are not too good either, young lady," he heard the physician say. "Now pull this sheet over you. Your slip is all right. Wear it too—"

"But it's only a half-slip, Dr. Riker, it only comes to my knees," Keth heard Gael protest. "I won't have anything on my top."

"You will have a sheet, which is enough. This is all Keth will have, plus his pants. I want both of you to come into my study and tell me how you got these burns."

The study was the big back room behind the examining rooms. It was a place of soft lights and of softer colors, a place where a man could relax and drop the burdens of the world that he had accumulated in his daily practice. Keeping a firm grip on the sheet around her shoulders, Gael slid into a contour chair. Keth did the same. He leaned back in the chair, then hastily sat up straight again.

"Most of that pain in your back will be gone tomorrow," Dr. Riker told him. "Take it easy, you two, and I'll have coffee for us in just a minute."

Over the coffee, they told their stories, Keth first, then Gael. Dr. Riker made each tell what had happened over and over again, until he was sure he had all the essential details, including the strange hallucination Keth had experienced while crouching behind the manhole cover with the blast of liquid electricity blowing past. Then the physician was silent.

"Do you object to Gael knowing you are my patient?" he asked Keth.

"She already knows it," Keth answered.

"Good. Is it all right for her to know exactly why you sought my help?"

"Yes," Keth answered.

"All right. I'll put it into as short a form as I can. About eight months

ago you lost your job test flying new rocket ships because you had developed the delusion that you would eventually be burned to death in an explosion of one of these ships. This became almost an obsession with you with the result that the company doctors felt you were unfit for further duty as a test pilot. Correlating with this obsession was a mental image of some lost, forgotten city."

"That is correct," Keith said.

"Tonight you were badly burned in some way that I cannot pretend I understand. Again you saw the city."

"Yes."

"With you was a young woman who tells me she has caught glimpses of what seems to be the same city all of her life." The physician turned to Gael.

"Isn't this correct, my dear?"

"It is," she answered.

The physician sipped coffee, then ran his fingers through what was left of his hair.

"The human mind is an enigma wrapped in a conundrum, with the whole bit then hidden inside a Chinese puzzle. Only somebody has lost the puzzle by dropping it into the middle of the ocean. Now we are supposed to find the puzzle, solve the conundrum, and unwrap the enigma. We are supposed to tell everybody what all of these strange things mean and we are supposed to offer scientific proof for everything that we claim."

Again his fingers went through his hair.

"Sometimes I wish I was just a doctor in general practice, setting a broken bone occasionally, giving flu shots and prescribing pills. It would be so easy to do these things."

Gael began speaking.

"All my life I have seen this city in my dreams. I lived in it when I was a little girl, playing in the most beautiful garden I have ever seen. It was

hidden behind high walls and was filled with flowers. Butterflies and hummingbirds came from the jungle into this garden. I also remember being a young woman in this garden, waiting there for the man I loved, from my dreams..."

Listening to her soft, sure voice, Keth Ard was aware of strange emotions rising in him. He was glad to hear her talk this, glad to know that in some degree at least some other person shared the private world of his dreams. When the world of dreams was shared with someone else, it began to lose its feeling of terror.

Dr. Riker ran worried fingers through his thin hair.

"Sometimes I wish I had never become a physician at all," he said. "I wish I had been a garage mechanic, or a clerk in a store, or something simple and easy. Better still, I wish I had remained a mud turtle. Why did I have to stick my head up out of the mud and start wondering why the world was the way it was? Why—"

Rising from his chair, he began to pace the floor of his study. Looking down, Keth saw that a deep groove had already been worn in the soft rug by Dr. Riker's feet as he had sought the solution to the problems his patients had brought him. His patients had lacked the grace to bring him simple problems!

"Why couldn't I be happy and let my patients go hang? Why did I have to give a damn whether my patients lived or died? Why couldn't I just sign their death, certificates and let the undertakers bury them and be happy to collect my bill? When they were compulsive drunkards, or users of dope, why couldn't I just let them be these things—and be happy to treat them?"

Gael looked questioningly at Keth, who smiled and said, "Dr. Riker is wrestling with his conscience. Don't be alarmed, he does this often."

"More than wrestling with my conscience is involved, young man," Dr. Riker said. "Involved is our whole understanding of the universe, of the real nature of time and of space. Also involved is the problem of what we are, what we really are, inside. If I seem to wrestle with this problem, I can be excused, I hope. The best scientists the human race has as yet produced have found no solution, as yet."

The physician wiped sweat from his face.

"I don't know why this should happen to me. I first wanted to be a doctor, to help sick people get well. I didn't want to investigate the physics of the universe. I didn't want to explore the meaning of space-time. I didn't want to dive so deep into philosophy that I would hardly ever have time to stick my nose outside my office for a breath of fresh air. All of these things were forced upon me. I have had to try to understand them if I was going to help my patients, who bring me the damndest problems!"

Querulous complaint was in his voice. He was like an elderly gnome that was filled with misery. He seemed to feel that he was a failure as a physician.

Pulling her sheet tightly about her shoulders, Gael rose and kissed him. He beamed at her.

"I think you are a very fine physician," she said. "I am glad Keth brought me to you."

"Thank you, my dear," the elderly gnome said, brightening.

"But you mustn't try to carry the burden of the whole world on one pair of shoulders," she told him. "Even Hercules had trouble doing it."

"Thank you again, my dear," Dr. Riker said feelingly. "It is little things like this that happen to me now and then that make me feel my work is worth doing. But I do want to help my patients and helping them is often so difficult!"

"I understand," Gael said. "Humans are born contrary. They improve their gift by constant practice. We improve our wits this way."

"We also kill each other by sharpening our wits in this way," Dr. Riker said. "And when you are almost dead, physically and emotionally, you come to me, to be patched up again, so you can go right back to the battle. And what both of you want to do right this minute is to rush straight back to that curio shop, and take it apart shelf by shelf, and take J. Eller apart with it."

"Can you read minds?" Gael gasped, astonished.

"Sometimes I think he can," Keth commented.

"Neither of you are going near that curio shop until you have grown some new skin," Dr. Riker said firmly.

Snap!

The sound was like that of the sudden tearing of fine silk, it was like electricity suddenly spurting across an invisible gulf, it was like atoms suddenly bursting their molecular bonds and spurting to freedom in a wide, wide universe. It was a sound that seemed to start on the other side of some vast void and after starting at the other edge of nothing, to rush suddenly to where something existed. It was as if on the other side of nothing, haunted fear existed, and here on this side of nothing, there was security, of a sort, and the sound wanted to be where security existed.

The impression that Keth Ard had of the quick *snap* was that of sudden movement at incredible speed. He did not know what moved, but he had the fleeting idea that the speed of light was a slow crawl in comparison to the speed of something else that was in operation here."

Blue Toga came out of nowhere. As the *snap* sounded, he seemed to puff into existence. He came on the incredible rate of speed that the sound seemed to use. One second, there was nothing. Then the *snap* sounded. A split second later, Blue Toga was in the study.

Blue Toga was both present—and not present. His feet were inches above the floor. Gravity did not seem to touch him or to pull him downward. Like a ghost out of some haunted yesterday, he hung in the air. Blue Toga was alive. He moved, he looked at the three people in the room, and he seemed to be aware of them, at least dimly.

Blue Toga looked like a man in a nightmare, like a dreamer trapped and held in some unhappy distortion of reality.

His appearance seemed to freeze the three people who were seeing him in a similar unhappy distortion of reality.

Blue Toga looked at the three people. He looked at Dr. Riker and seemed to doubt his own eyes, passing a hand across them as if to clear some distortion from his vision. He looked at Keth and seemed to find something vaguely familiar in him. His gaze went to Gael.

Now a smile appeared on his face. It was as if in her he had found

someone whom he recognized, someone whom he knew, or had once known. But he was not sure that he recognized her. The smile faded from his face, then came again, questioningly. His lips moved as if in greeting.

But no sound came.

He tried again. Like a man trying to talk in a dream, he was finding communication difficult.

Snap!

Again there was the sudden movement at incredible speed, again there was the sound of fine silk being swiftly torn.

Blue Toga heard the sound. He turned swiftly.

Hawk-nose entered the room. He came the same way Blue Toga had come, out of nowhere, swirling from nothing into something with a speed so fast the human eye could not pretend to follow the movement.

Hawk-nose's face was hot with anger. Blue Toga quailed before him, lifting an arm as if to ward off an expected blow. Hawk-nose's finger came up to point.

Blue Toga vanished. Disappeared, slid out of sight, went from somethingness into nothingness.

Hawk-nose remained in the room. Now he seemed to become aware of his surroundings for the first time. He looked at Keth and his gaze grew hard, he looked at Gael, sitting frozen stiff, and his eyes lashed at her, he looked at Dr. Riker—and drew back a step.

As if he saw something in the physician that frightened him, he turned and vanished too.

Again the sharp electrical *snap* sounded. Now the sound went from somethingness to nothingness. The first time the *snap* had come it had seemed to signal the opening of a door. The second time it came it seemed to mark the closing of this door.

The only sound in the office was that of the breathing of three frightened people.

It was Dr. Riker who brought up a finger to point at the spot where Hawk-nose had vanished.

"Did—did you see a man—two men—right there in that spot?" he whispered.

"Yes," Keth answered.

"Y—yes," Gael whispered.

IV

"Wait! Don't tell me what you saw. Don't tell me anything. I want both of you to write down what you saw, while it is still fresh in your memory. I'll do the same. Then we'll compare what we have written," Dr. Riker said.

From his desk, he produced sheets of paper and pens.

"Write, both of you," he said. "Even if we are scared half out of our minds, we'll be as scientific about this as we can!"

"Are—are you scared too?" Gael whispered.

"Hell, yes, my dear," the physician answered. "Write!"

The sound in the big study was now that of pens hurrying over paper. Keth wrote with half an eye on what was appearing on the paper. The rest of his attention was focused on the spot where he had seen the two men appear. Glancing at Gael, he saw that she was hardly noticing the paper on which she was writing. They had hardly finished before Dr. Riker took the pages away from them. Reading them hastily, he looked up.

"We all three saw the same thing!" he whispered. "Then it wasn't a hallucination. It was—it was—" He looked helplessly from Keth to Gael. "Well, what was it?" he snapped.

"Do you expect us to tell you?" Keth answered. "You're the head doctor here. We're just patients!"

"I know, I know, I know," Dr. Riker wailed. "But there are times when even a head shrinker is confused, though he usually doesn't let his patients find this out. I hope you will pardon me for being all shaken up but I never saw a ghost before. Now here I see two of them right in my own office! It's enough to shake the nerves of the oldest head shrinker alive!"

He began to pace the floor again.

"What we have just seen is contrary to the laws of nature. When my patients told me about such things, I thought they were hallucinating. Now I'm hallucinating! Where did those two people come from? How did they get here? What was that man in the blue wrapper trying to tell us? Why did he seem to recognize Gael? Why? What? Where? That second man, that fellow with the hawk nose, what did he want? Where did he go?"

Dr. Riker shook his head. He looked at Gael.

"I have seen this man before," she said. "I saw him tonight."

"Eh?" Dr. Riker said.

"He is the man I talked to in the curio shop," Gael continued.

"But my dear—"

"She's right about that," Keth said, excitement rising in his voice. "Or almost right. I didn't get a good look at the man in the shop and I didn't get a good look at the man who was here, but they are either the same man or they are two men who look much alike."

"And that's not the only place I have seen him," Gael continued. "Ever since I was a little girl, he has been a part of my nightmares."

Again the haunted expression was on her face.

"What?" Dr. Riker said.

"I have run from him in my dreams ever since I was a child," she continued. "His name in my dreams was Kuthu. He wanted to kill me, why I do not know."

"But this was only a dream," Dr. Riker protested.

"Were you dreaming when you saw these two men here in your own study?" Gael answered.

"*Touche!*" Dr. Riker said. "Why-oh, hell! Why didn't I just remain a mud turtle and be happy? Why did I have to wonder if there was something better than mud to wallow in? Why did I have to try to find this *something better*? A mud turtle has the best life. He can't think and there's always plenty of mud—oh, hell!"

Sudden decision showed on his face. "I know what I am going to do. I am going to take one of my own tranquilizers, before my mind explodes into a million pieces and spatters the whole room, after which the pieces began to chase each other across the wall paper!"

Leaving the study, he went into his office. When he returned he was smacking his lips.

"By tomorrow, I will be sane again. And I will remain sane, until I see those again!" He pointed to the pages of paper on which each had recorded his impressions of the two men who had been in the room. "Why don't I just tear those up and forget anything ever happened?"

He shook his head at this thought. "That's the mud turtle way, pull your head in your shell and pretend the world isn't out there. But nobody can ever really return to being a mud turtle again, after he has been a man!"

"Have you got any more of that stuff that will make you sane?" Keth questioned. "I could use a little of it myself."

"You already have it, in the shot I gave you," the physician answered.

"Eh?" Keth said.

"Why do you suppose you're sitting there acting so calm?"

"I didn't know I was."

"Well, you are. Both of you got a good stiff dose of tranquilizer. I can do a good job of protecting the sanity of other people. My own sanity is a different matter. Within another twenty minutes both of you will be sound asleep, you, Keth, here in this study, you, young lady, upstairs in my bedroom—"

"What?" Gael said.

"I shall sleep on the couch in my reception room," the physician said.

"But—"

"Of course, you do have another choice," Dr. Riker continued. "You can go home wearing half a sheet."

"I'll stay here," Gael said hastily. "After all, if I went home I would probably find Kuthu waiting for me in my dreams. No, thank you."

"Then I'll take you upstairs and show you my apartment," Dr. Riker said. "If it will comfort you any, my bedroom door has a lock on it."

"It will," Gael said. "And if you have another lock for the door of my dreams—"

"I already gave you that, in the tranquilizer," the physician said, as they moved through the door of the study. "It is guaranteed to keep your dream door locked until early tomorrow morning. And if you don't get to bed immediately, you will find you are asleep on your feet. The same goes for you, young man," he flung over his shoulder at Keth as he went out the door with Gael.

"No, young lady, no questions, no talk, no wonder, no worry. Plenty of time for that tomorrow."

The next morning the newspapers carried the story on page 18. Louella, Dr. Riker's receptionist, brought the papers. While they drank black coffee and some other mysterious concoction which the physician claimed was good for them, Keth and Gael read the paper in Dr. Riker's study. They also sat, carefully, on the edge of their chairs, having discovered by experience that the burns on their backs were now sore to the touch.

FIRE CAUSES THREE DEATHS

Many Treated For Minor Burns

The story of the fire on Beacon Street was given the once over lightly treatment. The names of the dead were given, so their kin would buy the paper. Because a high tension electric line had gone down in the fire, some minor fire department chief had assumed that this was the cause of the

blaze. The reporter had given this explanation in his story.

No effort had been made to investigate the real mystery that existed.

Nobody had even guessed that a mystery existed.

"They could burn down the whole city in that blast of electric air and nobody would know why it had happened!" Keth said, bitterly. "What is this, a conspiracy to hide a mystery by denying that a mystery exists?"

"Many people have asked that same question," Dr. Riker commented. "There is no conspiracy to hide facts. It is just that most people, including fire chiefs and reporters, prefer an explanation they can accept. Given such an explanation, they are happy. This way they can remain mud turtles a little longer."

"If you don't wonder about anything, you can keep out of a lot of trouble," Gael commented.

"Yes," Dr. Riker said emphatically. "Until the time comes when you hear a snapping sound right in your own study and you look up and see a man in a blue toga staring at you. Then you are in trouble. It is best, I have found, to wonder a little about trouble in advance. Then, when it comes, you are a little better prepared for it."

He shook his head.

"Though none of my wonderings had really prepared me to see a man in a blue toga standing right here in my study. Where did he come from? How did he get here? What did he want? He looked as if he had a material body but gravity didn't pull him down. What kind of a body did he have if gravity did not affect it? Perhaps more important—" He looked questioningly at Gael.

"I know," she said. "The second man, Kuthu. How does it happen that I have seen him in my nightmares since I was a child? Who is he? What—"

She broke off speaking as the receptionist entered. Louella was carrying two large bundles which contained clothes. On orders from Dr. Riker, the receptionist had been shopping.

"These are for the lady," she said, handing the larger bundle to Gael.

"And these are for the gentleman."

The expression on her face said she was not sure that Keth was a gentleman and had grave doubts that Gael was a lady but that she was determined to be a good receptionist.

"Have some coffee, Louella, and stop glaring at my patients," Dr. Riker told her. "Take your coffee up to the reception room and tell anybody who comes in or who calls on the phone that I have been called out of town on an emergency and that I won't be back until tomorrow—and maybe not then."

"Yes, Dr. Riker," the receptionist said.

Taking her bundle of clothes, Gael vanished upstairs. Keth used the study for his dressing room.

"Fortunately, your face was not as badly burned as your back," Dr. Riker told him. "But you won't be able to shave for a week."

Wearing a gingham dress two sizes too large for her, Gael came down the steps from the second floor.

"Louella is not very good at picking the right size," she said, doubtfully. "But this dress will cover my skin. How much was it?"

"It will appear on your bill, my dear," Dr. Riker told her. "That is, if I live long enough to send a bill."

"You're joking," Gael said.

"I only wish I were," the physician answered. "Yes, Louella," he said, as the receptionist appeared in the door of the study.

"There's a man out here who insists on seeing you—"

"I told you—"

"I told him what you said," the receptionist answered. "But he insisted. He says he knows you are here and that he must see you."

"Ah."

"He says his name is Eller and that he owns a curio shop on Beacon Street. Does this mean anything to you, sir? I am certain he is not a regular patient."

"Beacon Street? Eller?" The physician's gaze went to Keth and Gael. The study was suddenly so still that the hum of the motors of a truck passing through the alley was very loud.

Watching, Keth saw the haunted look appear again on Gael's face. He felt his own heart beat pick up. Dr. Riker looked as if he had stopped breathing.

"Um," the physician said, a toneless sound that meant nothing—or everything.

"Are you going to see him?" Keth asked.

"Yes," Dr. Riker answered. "I want to hear what he has to say. Also, with Gael's permission, I want to show him what she calls the Arthen Stone, and see how he reacts."

"You want to show him that?" Gael gasped.

"With your permission, only."

"But he will claim I stole it from him!"

"The claim will get him nothing," the physician answered. "Meanwhile, his reaction will give me a better estimate of him."

"But he is dangerous," Gael protested.

"So what?" the physician said, shrugging. "I have talked to murderers, to wife slayers, to would-be suicides. Talking to dangerous people is part of my professional work. May I show him the Arthen Stone?"

"Well, yes. But, where is it?"

"In the desk in my big examining room," Dr. Riker answered. He rose to his feet and looked at his receptionist.

"Show the man into my main examining room," he said.

"Yes, sir."

He turned to Gael and Keth. "I want both of you to stay here in my study and listen while I talk to this man. I'll leave the door open, so you can hear everything that is said. I want your impression of this man."

Nodding, Dr. Riker exited from the study. He was trying to smile, but the expression on his face was similar to that of a man who is preparing himself mentally to walk from his cell in death row to the gas chamber.

V

At the rear window, Gael started to draw the drapes. She stopped to beckon hastily to Keth. He moved to stand beside her.

His car was still in the parking place where he had left it the night before. Pointed away from them, with one door open, a tan panel truck was parked in the alley. Keth looked at it, then looked again to make sure.

It was the same truck that had been parked in the street in front of the curio shop.

As he stared, he saw the blank face of the slim man peer around the closed door in the back end of the truck. The face was hastily withdrawn.

"What—what are we going to do?" Gael whispered.

A booming voice from the examining room announced the arrival of the curio shop owner.

Taking hold of the edge of the drapes, Keth slowly drew them together.

"We're going to listen," he said.

"But—" She pointed toward the alley.

"Whatever it is they have in that truck, they won't dare use it as long as Eller is in the building," he said.

Relief crossed her face and was gone almost before it came.

"I—I'm scared," she whispered. "I—I don't want to get burned again. That terrible blast of living, electrified air—"

The haunted expression, like an old memory of lost horror that was trying to come to life again, was on her face.

He put his arm around her shoulder. As if this was exactly what she wanted and needed, she came closer willingly. Her face went under his chin. He could feel tremors in her body.

"Stout heart, Gael," he said softly.

From the examining room a booming voice was coming.

"Doctor, I simply have to have help. I don't know what has happened to me or what has gone wrong but I'm sick, mentally sick, I've got to have help, *got to!*"

Pain, fear, and bewilderment were mingled in the voice of the man in the examining room. Confusion was in it, and despair, and the desperation that is deeper than despair. The man in there sounded as if time was running out on him— and he knew it.

"Listen to that!" Keth whispered.

"He's begging for help in there and out in the alley he has a tan truck with the generator of that living electrified air!" Gael whispered. Her gaze came up to Keth's face.

"Keth, there's a liar around here somewhere!" she said.

"Either that, or an insane person, or both!" he said.

She was silent, moving closer to him at his words.

"Tell me about your problems," Dr. Riker's voice came. If the physician was under tension, this did not appear in the tones of his voice. He sounded like a clinician calmly discussing a problem.

The booming voice came again, telling its problems.

"Dr. Riker, I'm an honest man trying to make an honest living. I buy art objects and curios and try to sell them for a profit. It's no way to get rich, but it is a way to make a living, if I am willing to live in the apartment over my store and do my own cooking and my own housekeeping. I haven't done anything wrong, except maybe peddle a few art books that have a little sex in them from the back room of my shop. The police are not after me about this, though they have warned me a couple of times, but they haven't got anything on me. You should see the kind of stuff some of these art dealers handle! It would curl your hair."

"I understand," Dr. Riker's voice was soft and patient. "Tell me what happened to you to make you think you are mentally sick."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you," Eller answered. "I was just a little obscure, unknown art dealer, when a strange spell came over me."

"Spell?" Dr. Riker asked.

"That's what my friends called it afterwards, when they told me about it. I was sitting in my back room playing a little gin rummy with my friends when the next thing I knew it was the next day."

Dismay grew in the voice.

"What happened between the time when you were playing gin rummy and the next day when you came to yourself?" Dr. Riker asked.

"I don't really know. That's the truth—and that's the hell of it. I don't remember. I seemed to sort of black out. I don't know what I did when I was in this blackout, that is, I don't remember it myself. Later, my friends told me I acted as if I had suddenly become somebody else. Right in the middle of the gin rummy game, this happened. I suddenly began to speak a language none of them understood, I jumped up from the game and ran and locked the back door, this in spite of the facts that just a few minutes before I had unlocked it so a customer looking for a special art book could get in, then I ran to the front door of the curio shop and locked it, and then I ran again to the back room and dug out a pistol I had hidden behind some books, in case a burglar should ever try and get in—"

"I see," Dr. Riker said. "Did you try to shoot anybody with the pistol?"

"No. After I got it into my hands, I didn't seem to know how to use it. I

turned it over and over in my hands and even looked down the barrel, with all my friends sitting there figuring I had suddenly gone crazy and was going to shoot myself. But all I was trying to do was to find out how the gun worked. When I got the idea, I threw the pistol away, not because it wouldn't work but because I seemed to think it was so crude it wouldn't be any protection at all."

"Ah," Dr. Riker said. "When you understood it, the pistol was a crude weapon?"

"Something like that. It was a good gun, almost new, that I had bought cheap off a man who needed a couple of bucks. I don't know why I should suddenly think it was too crude to be useful."

"What did your friends do?"

"They tried to talk to me, they said. They said I talked to them, in a strange language they didn't understand. They said I treated them like they were dirt under my feet and made them stay with me all night, to protect me, though what they were protecting me from, I don't know."

"What did your friends do about this?"

"They didn't come around any more," Sadness crept into the booming voice. "I can't say that I blame them. Most of my old gin rummy friends won't even come on Beacon Street now. But I've got a new bunch of friends since then."

Anger replaced the sadness in Eller's voice.

"Ah," Dr. Riker's voice was carefully noncommittal, inviting further confidences but not requiring them.

"I wish I'd never seen a one of this new bunch!" Eller said.

"Something wrong with them?"

"Everything is wrong with 'em!" Eller answered. "One is a dwarf who looks like he was run off from some circus somewhere. He's got different eyes, but he hates me out of both of them. Only he is more scared of me than he hates me so he does what I say. Another of these new friends is a skinny hop-head who always has a knife up one sleeve or the other. Which

sleeve it's up at any time, I never know. I call this one Slim. Slim's a mainliner on horse."

"A heroin addict?" Dr. Riker asked.

"Yes. He shoots straight into the vein."

"That's not good," Dr. Riker said.

"You're telling me!" Eller exploded. "Another of these new friends is man named Cal who is so fat he waddles like a duck. Cal doesn't use dope, but he carries a gun and he can use it. And that's not all. There's those two women!"

"Ah?" Dr. Riker said again.

"One says her name is Shirla. She has eyes as black as smoke. The other says her name is Jarla. I swear, Doc, she has green eyes."

"Where did these women come from?"

"I'll tell you where they all come from a little later. Right now I want to tell you about these two women. They claim I own them, body and soul. They claim they are my servants and my concubines."

"Concubines?"

"That's what they say!" Eller answered. "If one of them ain't trying to get into bed with me, the other one is. And all the time this is going on that damned dwarf insists on sleeping at the foot of my bed. He claims he is my eunuch!"

Utter confusion was in the booming voice. "I don't want any prostitutes living with me, Doc, no matter if they do call themselves my concubines, and if I did, I wouldn't want any damned dwarf sleeping at the foot of my bed!"

"I can understand that," Dr. Riker said, soothingly. "Now as to where these people came from—"

"When I am not myself, when I am not like I am now, I go out around the city and hunt 'em up and bring home with me," Eller answered. "I don't think a single one of them is himself either. They're haunted, just

like I am. And they can't help themselves."

"Um!" Dr. Riker's voice had surprise in it as though here was an angle that even he had not heard before. "I—that is—How do you meet the costs of feeding them, clothing them—"

"They've bankrupted me, they broke me the first month. But they solved the money problem though in a way that is likely to get me into bad trouble, and I mean *bad!*"

"Yes," Dr. Riker said.

"When we run short of money—and we need plenty of it to buy the expensive parts for the machines we are building—that skinny Slim goes out and holds up a liquor store or that fat Cal waddles out and rolls a lush or Shirla or Jarla go out and turn a few tricks. I tell you these women are professional prostitutes—and they always bring the money home to me!"

Outrage was in the booming voice.

"Doc, I'm not a fence or a pimp and I don't want any gang of thieves bringing their loot to my place! But what the hell can I do? When I'm not myself, not like I am right now, I tell them to do these things! And they obey me as if I owned them!"

"Heavens!" Dr. Riker said. "You do have a problem."

At this touch of understanding and sympathy, Eller burst into sobs.

In the study, Keth and Gael looked at each other. Neither knew what to say. Keth moved to the back window and peeped between the drapes.

The tan truck was still in the alley.

"You said something about some kind of machine you are building," Dr. Riker's voice came.

"We're doing just that," Eller answered, "We've got it mounted in the back end of a tan truck. When I am like this, I don't know what the hell it is or what it does, but when I am not myself, I not only understand it, I am also the engineer who tells Cal and Slim how to build it. Doc, it is possible for a man to be- a dumb art dealer and an electronic genius at the same

time? That machine is a work of genius, if I ever saw such a thing!"

"It is possible, but it doesn't often happen," Dr. Riker answered. "There was one case of record where a seamstress in Scotland, who knew nothing of music and had no voice worth mentioning, sang like a grand opera star when under hypnosis."

"Have I been hypnotized, Doc? Is that what's wrong with me? Did somebody hypnotize me and then tell me to forget he had done it?"

Hope sounded in the booming voice. It was a new note for a voice that up until now had exhibited despair and fear and anger—but never hope.

"In your case, I don't believe it is as simple as hypnosis— though I don't know what is so simple about hypnosis," Dr. Riker answered. "But I doubt if hypnosis is the explanation for your difficulty. I think the answer lies somewhere in that very complicated area known as a split personality."

Dr. Riker was a clinician now, and a good one, a little unsure of his opinions as yet, but becoming more and more sure as he probed for answers.

"What's a split personality, Doc?" Eller asked.

"Let's not go into this right now," Dr. Riker answered. "It is a recognized clinical picture. I—ah—have a few other questions, one being how you happened to call on me for help."

"Your name and address was in my mind this morning when I woke up. That is, your name was in my mind, I had to look you up in the phone book to find out if you really existed. I got your address from the phone book."

"Where are your—ah—new friends this morning?"

"At my shop hard at work," Eller answered. "When I woke up this morning, I was myself again. Only they didn't know it. You can't tell any difference just by looking at me, the difference is in the way I act and talk. I didn't tell 'em I was myself again, I just kicked that Shirla—she's the one with the black eyes—I kicked her out; I mean into the kitchen and I kicked that dwarf so hard in the seat of the pants that his eyes are probably crossed permanently now, and I told Cal and Slim I was going for a walk

and for them to stay there and take care of things—and here I am."

"Uhm," Dr. Riker said. "What do your friends call you when you are not yourself?"

"Kuthu," Eller answered. "Or something like that."

"Ah," Dr. Riker said. "I take it then when you are Eller, as you are now, you are beginning to remember some of the things you do as—what was that second name—as Kuthu?"

"Some of 'em. Remembering what I did as Kuthu is sort of like remembering a dream."

"I see." Dr. Riker said.

"You can help me, can't you, Dr. Riker?" Eller's voice came, filled again with a pathetic pleading. "What I want is to be myself all the time, just a curio shop owner, maybe clipping a sucker for an extra buck now and then, maybe peddling a little pornography out the back door once in a while, but not doing anything really bad. I don't know what this Kuthu might do."

Alarm grew in the voice.

"I get the impression that Kuthu would just about as soon kill a man as look at him."

The alarm in the voice was becoming desperation.

"Ah," Dr. Riker said.

"You can help me, can't you?"

There was silence in the adjoining room.

"I'll do my best," Dr. Riker said.

"Oh, thank God for that. I was afraid I was so far gone that there was no hope for me, no hope at all. I can't tell you how much having your help means to me, Dr. Riker!"

The booming voice from the other room was that of a man doing his

best to express gratitude.

A desk drawer scraped.

"Did you ever see this before?" Dr. Riker asked.

"He's showing him the Arthen Stone!" Gael whispered.

There was a moment of silence. Then the voice that had so heartily expressed gratitude screamed with rage.

"You dirty double-crossing crook! Where did you get the Arthen Stone? It's mine, I tell you! It belongs to me!"

Sounds of a scuffle followed.

Keth Ard went into the next room, fast. Eller had Dr. Riker by the throat and was shaking the slightly-built physician like a dog shaking a rat.

Keth's fist went home to Eller's jaw. The hawk-nosed man reeled backwards and fell against the front door of the examining room. This door was opened by the receptionist, who had heard the noise. Seeing Eller, she drew back, screaming. Eller looked again at Keth Ard and fled into the reception room.

The front door slammed heavily behind him.

"Let him go," Dr. Riker said, huskily. "He didn't get the Arthen Stone."

"Are you all right?" Keth demanded.

"Yes."

Gael was coming from the study. She beckoned to Keth. He returned with her to the back room. One glance between the drapes told him that Eller was running up the alley toward the tan truck.

In the back door of the truck, Slim was gesturing to him to run faster.

"Out, everybody!" Keth shouted. "Out the front door and out of the building! Don't ask questions! Move!"

Neither the receptionist nor the physician questioned him. Louella went first with the other three right behind her. At the sidewalk, she paused.

"To the left!" Keth said. "Fast!"

Half a block away they stopped in front of a small neighborhood grocery store and looked back. Nothing had happened back at the building Dr. Riker occupied.

"Keth, are you sure—" Dr. Riker began.

"No, I'm not sure. I'm just not taking chances. Ah!"

The sound was that of a roar of wind. It came from the rear of the two-story brick building that Dr. Riker occupied. It moved from the rear of the building to the front so fast that it seemed to be tearing out the front wall almost before it had struck the back.

It came as a roar of wind and as a blast of electrified air. The building seemed to shatter under its impact. The bricks seemed to come apart. The front door flew clear across the street, the windows on both the first and second floors exploded outward with a bang. Bricks spewed downward in a stream that seemed to flow like water. They crossed the sidewalk and made a finger of bricks, as lava makes a finger of molten stone, in the street.

Brakes screamed as cars tried to dodge this spew of bricks that had suddenly come into the street.

Then came the blast. It was like a flash of intense light. It was so bright it lit up the morning sky as if the sun was trying to rise again.

Then came the roar. It was like thunder in the sky, thunder blasting where there was no cloud.

Then came the flame, then came the smoke. "Now I'm sure," Keth Ard said.

Leaping into the back end of the truck in the alley, the man who had called himself J. Eller slammed the door. He turned furious eyes on Slim, crouched over the aiming device of the *thegnar*.

"You idiot! You utter fool! Who told you to use the *thegnar* beam on that building?"

The tall dope addict tried to move backward from the fury in the hot eyes glaring at him.

"We were just trying to give you a chance to escape, Lord," he wailed.

"You destroyed the whole building!"

"But you were already out of it. We were just hitting at your enemies, trying to stop them from following you."

"The Arthen Stone was in that building. You may have destroyed it too!"

"It—I didn't know," Slim protested. "I was only trying to help." In need of a fix, Slim was jumpy. What he was seeing in the eyes of the hawk-nosed man was making him even more jumpy.

"We've got to have that stone. Now you may have destroyed it."

With the *thegnar* off, the beam of hot air was no longer blasting outward from the back end of the truck. A cloud of dust was spurting upward and outward from the stricken building. Flames were beginning to lick red tongues through the dust.

In the distance, a siren was wailing. The hawk-nosed man listened to this sound. He turned to the apprehensive dwarf crouched behind the steering wheel of the truck.

"Zandu, get this thing out of here, fast!"

The dwarf nodded, but did not dare turn his head to look behind him. Seated beside the dwarf on the front seat, the fat man, Cal, pulled his hat down over his head. Motors howled on all four wheels. The truck jumped ahead. In the back end, the hawk-nosed man was so busy trying to keep

his balance that he forgot to scream at Slim.

At the end of the alley, the dwarf turned right. Here cars were scurrying. The blast that had destroyed the building had set up alarm reactions in the nerves of all drivers in the vicinity. Skewing the truck into the street on two wheels, at the next cross street traffic had piled up so badly that the dwarf had to turn to the right again.

As a result of these two right turns, the tan truck was going around the block. At the next cross street, both a red light and a traffic jam caught the dwarf. A fire engine was screaming toward them. The dwarf hesitated an instant, then jammed on full power. He went straight through the red light and beat the first engine by a foot. Cal jerked his hat even farther down over his head.

The hawk-nosed man looked back. On the opposite side of the street they had just crossed, he caught a glimpse of the building the *thegnar* beam had struck. Dust was boiling upward from it. Bricks were in the street.

At the end of the block, he saw four people getting to their feet. One was a redheaded woman. The second looked like a startled gnome. The third was slender and well-built. The fourth was Dr. Riker's receptionist.

The hawk-nosed man screamed at the dwarf to stop the truck. As the dwarf tried to obey, the clanging fire engine that had just missed the back end of the truck swept across the intersection and cut off his view of the four people.

Slim had also been watching out the back door of the truck. He recognized two of the people, having seen them once before in the curio shop on Beacon Street.

"They must have run out the front door," Slim said.

"Of course!" the hawk-nosed man answered.

"What I mean is—"

"Who cares what you mean?"

"But if they got out, maybe they took this piece of rock with them,"

Slim protested.

"You fool! I have already reached this conclusion!" the man with the hawk-nose answered. In truth, this was a lie, but he had no intention of admitting that someone whom he regarded as dirt under his feet had thought faster than he had. He shouted again at Zandu to stop the truck.

In spite of powerful brakes, the dwarf needed almost a block to bring the tan truck to a halt. Going out the rear door, the hawk-nosed man returned alone.

In this man, now, the Kuthu personality was entirely dominant. The personality, the wishes, the hopes, the fears of J. Eller had been banished into some lost corner of the mind. The personality of the curio shop owner was now a futile ghost trying to regain control over his own mind and body.

Kuthu wanted to reach Dr. Riker and the people with him and to find out if they had saved the Arthen Stone from the destroyed building.

Traffic stopped him at the intersection where he had seen them. The fire engine had stopped. Frantic firemen were stringing long lines of hose from red hydrants toward the burning building. In the middle of the intersection, a policeman was stopping all traffic in all directions. Sirens were screaming as more squad cars and more policemen and more fire engines arrived.

Kuthu started across the street. The square-jawed cop in the middle of the intersection told him to get back where he belonged. Kuthu tried to tell the policeman who *he* was. The police officer didn't in the least care who he was.

"I don't care if you're Mahomet. The boys are fighting a fire here. They don't need any volunteer help from any citizens. Get the hell back on the sidewalk or I'll run you in!"

In his time, Kuthu had had the bowels drawn from the living bodies of people who resisted his authority. He would have liked to treat this policeman the same way, but, as the cop started toward him, he hastily retreated to the sidewalk.

Looking across the street, he could see nothing of Dr. Riker or of the

redheaded woman or the man or the receptionist. Vaguely, he remembered that the woman had given him her name in the back room of his curio shop. Gael Dana. Was she in the phone book?

Going back to the tan truck, Slim was not quite fast enough in opening the door. To relieve his feelings, Kuthu kicked the skinny dope addict in the shins. When Slim screamed with pain, this made the hawk-nosed man feel better.

In the taxicab taking them away from the street intersection, Gael Dana asked again and again.

"Did you bring the Arthen Stone, Dr. Riker?"

"Eh? What?" The physician was so shaken in mind that he hardly realized where he was. "The stone? Oh. What did I do with it?"

He reached into his jacket pockets. His fingers brought out a prescription pad with his name on it, plus a pen. Another pocket revealed a small bottle of his own brand of tranquilizers. Hastily gulping one of these himself, he passed the bottle to Gael, Keth, and Louella. Gael had to remind him again about the stone.

"Oh. Yes." He searched his pants pockets and brought out a small piece of green stone.

At the sight of it, Gael sighed with relief. "I don't know why I think it is so important, I just do, that's all."

"Important? Oh. Ah. Yes. Other things are also important too, such as where we are going to live. I don't have an office any longer. I don't have a roof over my head. I don't have a bed to sleep in. All I have is a pad of prescription blanks and a receptionist."

He looked at Louella riding in the front seat of the cab.

"And I don't have any place for her to receipt," he said.

"I can take a vacation," Louella said. She was still pale and visibly shaken. "I fact, I *want* a vacation, starting right now."

"My dear, I can't possibly get along without you," Dr. Riker said hastily.

"You don't have an office," Louella said.

"We'll arrange that some way—"

"If the building is going to collapse around me again—"

"It won't happen again. This fellow will think we died in the building. Even if he suspects we are still alive, he won't be able to find us."

"I have an apartment," Keth said, tentatively.

"If you think I'm going to live in an apartment with two men—" Gael began. "A girl doesn't want her stockings, which she has just washed and hung up to dry in the bathroom, and her—her— Well, she doesn't want her things inspected by two men!"

"I understand, my dear," Dr. Riker said, hastily. "However, I think it is best for the three of us to stick together right now. In fact, it is almost necessary, for our protection."

"If we need protection, we can go to the police," Louella said.

"With a story like this?" Dr. Riker demanded, heatedly.

"You are a responsible physician," Louella said. "The police will listen to you."

"With a story like this, the police would want to hold me for examination," Dr. Riker said. "When I tried to claim I had seen an actual ghost, my fellow head shrinkers would all be called in to examine me! How they would love to take a crack at me! They would be the ones who would have to decide whether or not I was still sane enough to be allowed to run around loose. As often as I have fought them, they would love a chance like this. No! We are not going to the police unless we have to do so in order to save our lives. No!"

"Why not my apartment?" Gael said, suddenly. "It has two bedrooms because Jimmie lived with me. I noticed a day or so ago that the adjoining apartment is now for rent. There is a connecting door between the two apartments. It's locked now, of course, but the manager would open it upon request—"

"A connecting door?" Keth said sharply.

"Don't be thinking wrong things about me!" Gael said sharply. "It is and always has been my suspicion that the whole building where I live was originally designed to be used for love nests. Each two adjoining apartments have an inner connecting door. If a man rented one, he could rent the one next to it for his mistress. They could visit through the inner connecting door without anybody on the outside being the wiser."

Suddenly blushing furiously, she was silent.

"I have heard of such love-nest buildings but I have never seen one with my own eyes," Dr. Riker said. "Nor did I ever have a patient who lived in one of them."

"It was once a very smart apartment building, with very high rents," Gael said. "But nobody seems to be able to afford to keep a mistress these days."

"I can understand that, with taxes being what they are," the physician said. He looked at Keth and at Louella. "Shall we take refuge in Gael's apartment and rent the adjoining apartment for Keth and me."

His worried eyes sought his receptionist. "My bank account can stand this, can't it, Louella?"

"I hope so," the receptionist answered. "But your check book is back there in the building you once owned."

"Then you must drop in at my bank and pick up another book of checks for me. You can also ascertain my balance while you are there. Then you can report to my insurance company and tell them to send out their investigators and adjustors."

"That's enough work for the rest of the day," Louella said firmly. "If you pile any more on top of me, I may really go on that vacation."

"I didn't mean for you to do it today, I meant for you just to get started on it tomorrow morning. Then you can call the telephone company and make arrangements for my calls to be referred to my number, when I get a phone and a new number in my new apartment which I haven't rented yet."

"Couldn't Eller trace you via your new number?" Keth asked.

"Perhaps he can, but this is a risk that has to be taken. After all, I am a physician. Many people depend on me. I must make some provision for them. I mean for Louella to answer the phone in my new apartment, when I get it, and explain to the patients that I am temporarily out of an office and refer them to my colleagues for medical and psychological assistance."

For a moment, as he saw his personal life settled, Dr. Riker's face lost its frown.

"We will have the driver drop you at your apartment, Louella. Go to bed and rest. I will call you as soon as I can. If anybody asks how the fire started, tell them you have no idea of its origin."

"Yes, Dr. Riker," Louella said. "But if you don't mind, just drop me here and I'll catch another cab."

"As you wish, my dear."

Gael's apartment building belonged to an older day in Los Angeles. Four stories tall, with a white stucco front, it sprawled around an inner patio and a pool. The cab dropped them in front. Dr. Riker paid the meter tab, adding a tip which made the driver happy.

Gael's apartment was in the middle of the building and extended all the way through it. Big windows in the front looked down over the patio and into the pool. At the rear was a tiny kitchen. Windows here overlooked the garage and the alleys at the rear. The big, comfortable living room was quietly decorated in delicate shades of rose. Gael showed them the two bedrooms and the connecting door that led to the adjoining apartment, then got the manager on the house phone.

"The manager says the next apartment is still available," she said, hanging up. "He will be right up with the keys."

"How are we going to pay him?" Keth asked.

From the card compartment of his billfold, Dr. Riker took two blank checks, carried there for emergencies. The manager was happy to accept a check for a month's rent. He yielded the keys to the outer and inner doors with an air of smirking nonchalance which got him a hard look from Gael.

"These gentlemen are my friends, not my lovers," she said firmly. "Don't jump to any wrong conclusions."

"I understand perfectly, Miss Dana," the manager said, still smirking.

With the check tucked into his pocket, he departed. The expression on his face said that he thought Miss Dana was doing quite well for herself. Gael glowered at the door that had closed behind him.

"Well, we're safe, for the moment," Dr. Riker said, sighing.

"There were many times last night and today when I thought my next breath was going to be my last one."

"You and me both," Keth Ard said. "In fact, after all that has happened, I have concluded that the job of a test pilot on new rocket ships is the easiest, safest kind of work I ever had."

"You can add my name to the list of people who thought they were drawing their last breaths," Gael said.

She was silent for a time, then spoke slowly. "Now that I am back home, Jimmie is very much on my mind."

"Your brother who occupied the other bedroom?" Dr. Riker asked.

She nodded. "We have always been very close. If anything happened to him, I knew it."

Tears formed in her eyes.

"Do you think something has happened to him?" Dr. Riker gently asked.

"I think he's dead," she replied. "I think that Eller, or Kuthu, or whatever his name actually is, killed him."

"I am sorry, my dear," the physician said. "Why do you think he would have killed your brother?"

"To get the Arthen Stone," she answered. "I think he will kill us too, if we give him the chance, just to get it."

Slowly, Dr. Riker shook his head. "I hope you are wrong about your brother, but I have seen too many feminine intuitions to go against one of them too strongly. I also have to admit that when the Kuthu personality is in possession of Eller, he impresses me as being capable of any act, no matter how debased or how evil. In his normal state, Eller is relatively harmless. Eller is a little man content to play a minor role in life. But when Kuthu is in the driver's seat, we had best take all possible precautions?"

"Do you think that it was Eller, the harmless one, who came to consult you?" Keth asked.

"I do."

"What do you think caused the change?"

"The sight of the Arthen Stone," the physician answered. "This brought the Kuthu personality from its hiding place and made it complete dominant. As soon as he saw it, he changed instantly. Kuthu, I am afraid, is a killer."

"I agree with you," Gael said. She rose and went into the bedroom that had been occupied by her brother. She returned an instant later with a .32 caliber automatic pistol in her hand.

"This belonged to Jimmie," she said.

"Um," Dr. Riker said. "Well, right now, it may be useful. Better keep it in your purse from now on. But don't let the police find it there."

"I brought it in here to give it to one of you," Gael answered.

"Eh?" the physician said.

"I don't need it." Handing the weapon to Keth, she went into her own bedroom, to return a moment later with a second pistol that looked to be a mate to the first.

"Jimmie bought two of them and gave this one to me."

"I see," the doctor said. "Well, under normal circumstances, I would not recommend to anyone that he or she carry a weapon of any kind, or even have a weapon around the house. However, these are not normal

circumstances. In fact, I—I wish I had a gun myself, sort of."

Keth handed the first pistol to him.

Taking it, the physician turned it over and over in his hands. "I—well, now that I am faced with the situation, I must admit I don't know how to use it. I guess I have spent too many years trying to save human lives to have much liking for a device for destroying lives."

"But you said you wanted it," Keth said.

"Yes, I know I did. But what was really speaking there was a wish for security. I was hoping that a gun might give it to me. This, I fear, is a delusion. A gun makes me feel worse somehow." He looked helplessly at Keth Ard.

Keth took the weapon from the fingers of the physician, slipped it into his jacket pocket after checking to make certain it was loaded and had a cartridge in the chamber.

Dr. Riker looked relieved.

"I must confess that just the feel of such a weapon horrifies me. I suppose I have worked with too many real and potential killers, trying to help them, usually with little hope of improvement, to have any liking for weapons left in me."

"I agree with you," Keth said. "But sometimes weapons are necessary, for self-protection. When it comes to the point of kill or be killed—"

"Why couldn't it come to the point of peaceful understanding instead?" the physician asked. "That is a possibility no one ever seems to consider. But I guess the human race has not developed far enough as yet to see that possibility." He sighed and shook his head.

Keth and Gael wanted to talk about what had happened. Dr. Riker forbade it. He prescribed rest instead, for all of them. He gave both another of his pills, and took one himself. Gael went into her bedroom and closed the door. Keth and Dr. Riker went to the apartment the physician had just rented. They rested. Under the influence of the mild sedative, Keth found himself drifting into a world of quiet peace.

When he awakened, it was early evening. Gael was calling from the connecting door, saying she had soup, a salad, hamburgers, and coffee ready. When they had finished eating, they were ready to talk. Dr. Riker brought out the Arthen Stone.

Snap!

Blue Toga appeared in the air of the room. Again there was something on his face resembling the confused bewilderment of a man who is walking in a dream and who knows this, but does not know how to awaken. Now he was a man who had grown a little more accustomed to walking in dreams, who knew his way about in them a little better, who had begun to find his footing. He was not a man who really knew his way as yet in dreams, his footing was not fully secure. He was still like a ghost from a haunted yesterday but now he seemed to recognize the three people in the room, to see them a little better, perhaps to regard them as friends.

Hanging in the air in defiance of gravity, but still appearing to be solid and three dimensional, he spoke to them.

No sound came through the gulf that separates the world of dreams from what people who live in a three-dimensional realm like to call the world of reality. His lips moved. He looked hopefully at them as if he was expecting a reply.

"He's trying to tell us something," Gael whispered. "I— I can almost read his lips!"

In the living room of her apartment, she was sitting very still. She, as had Keth and Dr. Riker, had now lost some of their fear of this incredible visitor. This was a second visit, a repetition of something that had happened before, hence it was at least a little familiar, a little known—and a little less to be feared because it had moved across the border from the unknown to the known.

"Try hard to grasp what he is saying, my dear," Dr. Riker urged Gael.

She watched the man in the blue toga from fascinated eyes.

"He's saying—I—He's saying—I can almost understand him. It's as if he is speaking a language I knew once, somewhere but have forgotten, and now I have to get the meaning of a lost language by reading his lips!"

In his dream, watching closely, Blue Toga seemed to grasp that he was not being understood in that world of dreams into which he was peering. An expression of failure showed on his face. He wanted them to understand him. But how could this be done, how could communication be established?

He snapped his fingers. The expression on his face became that of a man who has found the solution to a difficult problem. He pointed.

Following the line of the finger pointing from the world of dreams, Keth Ard saw that Blue Toga was pointing toward the Arthen Stone.

VII

The figure of the man that defied gravity took a short step toward the Arthen Stone, lying on the coffee table. Keth moved quickly, to make certain the little piece of green stone was not snatched away into the world of lost dreams from which this man had come. But Blue Toga stopped short of touching it. He seemed unable to touch it, or anything else in the room. As he drew back from the coffee table, his hand touched an end table beside the sofa.

The hand vanished.

The end table was just as substantial as before but the hand up to the wrist had disappeared into the polished surface of the wood. Blue Toga seemed unaware that his hand had vanished. As he moved, his hand came back out of the table and seemed to be as substantial as before.

From this, Keth knew that the matter out of which Blue Toga's body was made was different from the three dimensional world of the human senses. This was one reason Blue Toga had difficulty in seeing them, why they could not hear him when he spoke. His vocal chords were made of matter which would not move air!

Keth also realized that if Blue Toga had tried to pick up the Arthen Stone—or anything else—his fingers would simply pass through it as if it did not exist. Keth also realized that what he was seeing standing in the

air in defiance of gravity was not a physical body. Possibly, in some world which to ordinary men would seem to be the land of dreams, it was physical, substantial, and real. But here in the twentieth century world of Los Angeles, here in the mad space age, it was visible to the eyes alone—not tangible to the sense of touch. The life that sustained it obviously did not come from the mixture of oxygen and the energies of the air with the chemicals of the soil in the process called digestion. It was obviously alive just the same. Perhaps life had other forms than the mammalian developed on the surface of Earth, forms which used energies that humans did not know existed!

Blue Toga pointed toward the Arthen Stone, then to Gael, then reached for the stone. Looking at her, he smiled and nodded his head.

"He wants me to pick up the stone," Gael said. Excitement was rising in her voice.

Reaching out to the coffee table, she lifted it in her fingers and held it up toward Blue Toga for approval.

Blue Toga smiled and nodded. His beaming face was the color of old ivory. Something of the quality of the old Egyptian monuments was on it, but it was not an Egyptian face. Rather it had in it the quality the old artists of that period had tried to capture in stone.

Looking at him, Keth saw there was a kind of goodness on the face of this man who had walked from dreams to them. Blue Toga was kind, he was friendly, he was helpful. His face had tones of expression on it that could only have come from suffering which he had long endured and finally triumphantly overcome. There was something of the saint about his face.

He made signs to Gael Dana.

"He wants me to lie down on the couch and place the Arthen Stone on the center of my forehead," she said. Her gaze went inquiringly to Dr. Riker, a glance that asked his professional opinion as to whether or not she should do this. Without waiting for him to make up his mind, she made the decision herself.

"I'll do whatever he wants," she said.

Rising, she moved to the couch, where she laid down. Very carefully, she placed the little green stone in the exact center of her forehead.

"The occult literature say the third eye of a human being is located at that exact spot," Dr. Riker whispered, looking anxious.

"What's the third eye?" Keth asked.

"Nobody knows. Nobody has ever found it with the knife of a surgeon. The old legends say it is a center of clairvoyant perception."

Like two anxious fathers, one from the world of dreams and one from the Los Angeles of the twentieth century, Blue Toga and Dr. Riker moved toward her.

She blinked sleepy eyes up at them.

"I'm—I'm so sleepy," she whispered.

"My dear!" Dr. Riker said, sharply.

"I'm seeing beautiful lights, swirls of colors, indigo, violet, with touches of red—"

She closed her eyes.

"I'm still seeing them!" Her voice was suddenly a whisper.

"With your eyes closed?" Dr. Riker asked.

"Y—yes."

At her sides, her arms stiffened slightly. Instantly her legs stiffened. A convulsive movement passed through her torso and it stiffened.

Dr. Riker snatched the Arthen Stone from her forehead.

Snap!

The sound of tearing silk came from behind them. It had a *going away* quality about it. Turning, Keth Ard knew what to expect.

The air of the room was empty. Blue Toga was gone.

Keth turned to find Dr. Riker examining the young woman on the couch. The physician lifted one arm, then released it. It did not fall but remained hanging in the air as if it had decided to defy gravity too.

Dr. Riker turned horrified eyes upon Keth Ard.

"This is a condition that once was called waxen catalepsy. At least that's what I hope it is. It means she has gone into a very deep trance and that if any part of her body is moved, it will remain in the position in which it is placed until someone else moves it. See."

He raised the arm until it was erect. It remained in this position. He lowered it to the couch. It remained there as if all life had departed from her body.

He felt her pulse, then laid his ear upon her chest to listen.

"There's no pulse that I can feel and no heart beat that I can hear."

"Then she's dead!" Keth whispered. To him, the absence of a pulse and a heart beat meant death. Shock and a feeling of loss were suddenly deep within him. Hardly twenty-four hours before, he had not even known this woman existed. Then she had twisted her way past him on Beacon Street and he had seen her haunted face and had found someone who shared his own horrible feeling of fleeing from yesterday.

"No!" Dr. Riker's face suddenly had deep lines in it. "This may be deep trance instead of death. At least I hope this is what it is."

"Can you bring her back to life?"

"She's not dead!" Dr. Riker shouted the words.

"Then bring her back to consciousness."

The physician shook his head.

"I don't dare."

"Why not?"

"For two reasons. One, if I force her back to consciousness, the shock may kill her. Two, the shock may do so much damage to her brain and

nervous system that she will be insane for the rest of her life. Keth, all we can do is wait. If she returns to consciousness herself, perhaps I can help her."

Sweat was on the face of this elderly gnome as he tried to decide what was best for his patient. Joseph Riker was one of those rare physicians who put the welfare of his patients above all other considerations.

He wiped the sweat from his face and spoke again.

"I'm sorry, Keth, that I can't promise more, that I can't do something. But even the best doctor on Earth knows so little about that very complex thing called a human being. More has happened to her than I understand. I can go out to a drugstore and get drugs which will force her back to consciousness, but this is a risk I dare not take."

"What about calling an ambulance and taking her to a hospital?"

"Have you ever faced the receiving room of a hospital?" The physician shook his head as bitter memories passed through his mind of other patients who had gone through this procedure. "No! We're better off right here. I think, given time, she will regain consciousness. Then I can work with her. I may have to work with her, intensively, for hours, or even for days, to assure her recovery."

Bitter thoughts were in Keth Ard's mind. As he saw Gael lying on the couch, he began to realize how much she had come to mean to him. Much of his bitterness was directed at Blue Toga.

"He looked like a right guy!" Keth said over and over again. "She trusted him. Why would he do anything like this to her?"

"I do not know his motives or his powers. I agree with you that he looked all right. I would have trusted him too. I did trust him. It may be that something happening somewhere else, or about to happen somewhere else, requires that Gael be in a deep trance here."

Keth stared at the physician.

"This is a universe of tremendously intricate relationships, Keth," the physician said. "Minds here, minds there, are hooked together in a kind of telepathy. These are group minds. They work together, they help each

other. Perhaps Gael and Blue Toga belong to the same group, somehow."

He spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "Who knows the truth of this universe? No man has as yet found an answer to Pilate's question: *What is truth?* Also, please remember that since you first brought her to my office, I have hardly had time to think."

"Sorry, sir. I meant no criticism." Keth turned away. Bitterness rising from a mixture of fear and anger was in him, fear because he did not know what had happened to Gael, anger because he felt himself to be helpless in this situation.

The minutes ticked into an hour.

On the couch, Gael did not stir.

The telephone rang in Gael's bedroom. Both men ignored it.

Hours slipped by. The desperation in Keth Ard grew stronger and stronger. An idea came into his mind. He picked up the Arthen Stone from the coffee table where Dr. Riker had placed it.

"Is it possible that she—the secret part of her, not her physical body—has gone into Blue Toga's world of dreams?" he asked.

"It is possible," Dr. Riker answered. "I don't know that this has happened, I don't know what has happened, but this could have taken place."

"Then I'm going into the same world," Keth said.

"What?" The physician gasped. "How—"

"I'm going to use this stone the same way she used it," Keth answered. "If it worked on her, it may work the same way on me."

"But she was told to do this," the doctor protested. "You haven't been told to do anything."

"Nobody ever told me to become a test flight rocket ship pilot, either. It was my own idea," Keth Ard answered. "This is my own idea too."

He lay down on the floor. The gun in his jacket pocket made a lump

under his back. He ignored it.

"Are you out of your mind?" the physician gasped, moving toward him.

"Probably. But keep your hands off of me."

Dr. Riker backed away, protesting that Keth did not know what would happen.

"I never knew what was going to happen when I took a new rocket ship up on a test hop," Keth answered. "Gael took a chance. I'm going to take the same chance."

"But-"

"Don't send flowers," Keth said.

Putting the Arthen Stone in the middle of his forehead, he closed his eyes.

Dimly and far away, as if from some elfin universe, he saw a sparkle of light in the middle of his forehead. This was not seen with the eyes, but was perceived by some other unknown organ. The brain interpreted the phenomena as vision, as something seen. The sparkle of light was a tiny thing, like a single firefly dancing on the edge of deep space, like an atom spinning at the edge of a molecular abyss. It came and it went, it danced, it sparkled, it grew brighter and then dimmer, like the twinkling of a star seen in the deep quiet night of summer. It was a little thing, an insignificant thing of no apparent consequence, beautiful and bright, entrancing and alluring, beckoning and calling.

Keth did not know how he was seeing this. His mind at this moment was not concerned with the mechanics of visual sight. He knew his eyes were closed and that he was not seeing this dancing point of light through normal vision. This seemed to prove there was another way of seeing of which most men knew nothing. Perhaps those gifted with clairvoyant faculties knew more about this strange way to see. All he knew was that he was seeing this image. He wondered, vaguely, if some radiation from the Arthen Stone was causing this effect. Perhaps the small piece of green stone had traces of radioactive elements in it. Perhaps these accounted for the dancing star image. Perhaps...

The colors came. They came suddenly, swirling in from the periphery of his vision, magenta and purple and violet, all mixed together and all in motion. In these colors was such beauty that the mind was startled, then was soothed and pleased. It had forgotten that such beauty existed in the universe. Now that it remembered, it was suddenly at peace with itself. Some old, long-lost, happy memory seemed to surface from the depths of the mind with the appearance of the colors. The mind was happy to see the colors, to remember again that such beauty existed.

Then came deep blues and more swirling purples and more magenta dots of flashing color. All of them were iridescent, all of them glowed from some inner source of beauty, all of them flowed out of the great hidden heart of color. Each color had its own source of light hidden within it, a source that hinted at mysteries and at wonders hidden somewhere behind all of this, mysteries which the mind could not at this moment probe but which excited it to awe. The mind was agape, it was on tiptoe with the wonder of young love.

Back of all the colors was a trace of hidden gold and a hint of pure white light.

The colors expanded and grew thin. Keth Ard could see through them, and beyond them he saw the city, clearly, firmly.

It was set in the midst of a tropical jungle that was actually a large oasis at the edge of a great desert; it was a city of low houses with flat roofs where the residents enjoyed the cool evening air, a city with narrow winding streets, a city with many green gardens which contained small pools of water and brightly blooming tropic flowers.

His first glimpse of the city was from above, in a way that he did not understand. If he had been flying a ship, he would have seen the city in this way, as a whole. But he was not flying a ship. He seemed to be an observation point, high above the city, and moving down toward it.

He recognized it instantly. It was home to him, home in all of the emotional tones the word has, home in the sense of security and warmth, home in the sense of the place where love is. It was the home he had never had, the home for which some hidden part of him had hungered all of his life.

As he saw the city and felt the hunger in him for a long lost and now

rediscovered home, he saw one other thing—a tall tower rising inside high walls at the edge of a city. Near the tower sprawled a building almost big enough to be a palace.

He knew then that this was the city he had seen in his tortured nightmares, the city of the wind that burned, the city of the electrified air, the city of pain and fear, the city of Kuthu!

He found that the observation point which he seemed to be was dropping arrow-fast toward some target in this city.

In the Los Angeles of 1980, in a once-luxurious apartment that had been built to serve as a convenient way of establishing love nests for men wealthy enough to afford such luxuries, Dr. Joseph Riker snatched the small piece of green stone from the forehead of the physical body of Keth Ard. Tossing it across the room, he hardly noticed that it went under the sofa where Gael was lying. He hoped that removal of the stone would bring Keth to consciousness, but feared this would not happen. He knew the stone had done its work, it had set off a chain reaction that would probably have to run its course in the deep levels of the psyche of a human being.

With the stone removed, Keth did not stir. Dr. Riker felt his pulse. It was already slow and was growing slower as the body mechanism began to stop. He rolled back the lid of one eye. The eyeball was turned upward and inward as in sleep and in trance. He listened to the beat of the heart. It was only a faint flutter and as he listened, it went into silence.

Rising, he went over to the couch and examined Gael again. She was in the same state as Keth. The telephone rang. And rang again. He did not hear it and would not have answered it if he had heard it. His mind, his heart, perhaps his soul, were with his two patients. He was trying desperately to think of some way to help these two people who were dependent upon him.

It did not occur to him that he might need some way to help himself. If either or both died, he would have a difficult time explaining to the police, to a coroner's jury, why he had not called an ambulance and taken his patients to a hospital. The district attorney might talk of murder. Even if none of this happened, there might be unpleasant inquiries from the local medical association.

None of these possibilities mattered a damn to Dr. Riker. They would be as nothing compared to the suffering he would undergo in his own mind if he failed his patients.

VIII

Gael Dana went into the lights, into the colors, into the swirls of moving color and form. There was no fear in her. This was a trip dimly remembered from other times, from other places, a trip she knew intuitively she had made before.

Beyond the lights and the colors, she saw the city. A little gasp of wondering bewilderment came up in her, a feeling of happy joy and of pleasure. Seeing the city, she knew she was going home.

When the change took place, it came about as simply and as naturally as breathing, as the beating of the heart. Enormous psychological subtleties were involved in the change but to Gael Dana at this moment, these subtle things seemed simple.

She was herself when she went into the light. When she came out of the light and the colors, she was still herself.

But it was a different self. She shifted from Gael Dana to someone else with a different name, a different body, a different personality, a person who spoke a different language, who lived in a different time, in a different world. The only aspect that remained the same was the heart. It remained unchanged as she passed through subtle changes that have bewildered the inquiring minds of Earth's best psychologists who have sought to understand this mystery. Only the heart, only love, remained unchanged.

She became a young woman waiting in a tropic garden set behind high stone walls at the rear of a huge, sprawling stone house. Her name was not Gael Dana. It was G'jhil. There was no last name. In this time, last names had not as yet been invented. There was only the first name—G'jhil. The *jhil* conveyed the information that she was the daughter of a wealthy and influential man of this city.

The time was dusk. Somewhere near her was the sound of running and splashing water coming from a small waterfall. To a race of people who lived at the edge of the desert and who knew the horror of thirst in the great wastes of sand, the whisper of running water was the sweetest sound the ear could hear. After the water had splashed its way through the falls, it was led by channels to the roots of tropic plants which lifted thick trunks and leafy fronds overhead. The air was fragrant with the scent of exotic blooms. Hummingbird wings throbbed in the dusk air. A gray moth with wings six inches across fluttered before her face. She did not pull away from it. The moth was an old friend.

G'jhil was seventeen and in love and was waiting for the man she loved to come to her in the scented night. Because she was in love, she loved the whole wide world and everything in it. At this moment, she even loved Kuthu, in a kind of a way. She also feared him exceedingly, but as she waited for the man she loved, the fear was in abeyance. The love in her whispered that some way could be found to circumvent Kuthu. At least, this was what she hoped. Inside the main house, she knew her father, whose name was H'jhil, was talking to an old priest whom both loved.

A shouting was in the distance. She knew the sound as coming from a group of Kuthu's men, perhaps pursuing someone who had opposed him, perhaps running some poor devil at the end of a spear.

For an instant, this knowledge shocked her and made her afraid, then the fear vanished as she remembered that not even Kuthu would dare take liberties with H'jhil or his daughter. Too many people loved her father for this to happen. But the hate of the hawk-nosed Kuthu remained in her mind. This was a feeling she knew she shared with many others who also hated this noble who had seized power by what was regarded as great magic and who had upset the ancient and peaceful ways of this group who had fled here to the edge of a vast desert to escape persecution from a powerful nation to the south.

The people of this city were refugees and had been refugees across so many centuries that even their oldest and wisest priests who had access to the old records of their history could hardly find a time when they had not been fleeing. She wondered if the time for flight had come again, now from one of their own nobles.

In this garden, in the dusk, G'jhil was now aware of something else—a haunted feeling. It seemed to her that she was two people, almost, one was

G'jhil, the second was somebody ' else who lived in some other place and in some other time. A moment of *deja vu*, a feeling of having lived this moment before, came over her. For a split second, she remembered Gael Dana, though to her she did not seem to be remembering. The feeling startled her. Catching a glimpse of Gael Dana in some far-off time and a far-off, unknown place, she grasped intuitively that someday she would be this young woman with the red hair in the strange city of the future. The personalities of Gael Dana and G'jhil did not conflict. They were actually the same personality in different stages of growth as it went through the long experience of life on the third planet outward from the sun.

In contrast to Kuthu, who had seized control of the man named Eller, who was not Kuthu in a different time and who was actually an invader in the mind of Eller, Gael Dana and G'jhil were the same person, the same unit of consciousness, expressed in different places, in different bodies, and in different times. There was no quarrel between Gael Dana and G'jhil, no real inner conflict between them. They slid into each other and became one in the same way that a hand fits into a glove, easily and smoothly, with the exception that G'jhil had a flash of prevision, a glimpse that told her something of the woman she would become in some future world. Then the prevision was gone and she was left alone in the dusk that was turning into a haunted night. The sound of shouting was nearer.

The door opened into the garden. Hearing the sound, thinking it was Cethn, the man for whom she waited, she ran toward it. A different voice called to her from the darkness. She knew it was not Cethn, that it was Di-ur instead, the old, wise priest whom she had known all of her life. She loved Di-ur. He had always been kind to her, he had always understood her, and he had taught her a little of the ancient magic that had been brought down with this people from lost times, as much of it as she could understand and use. Full use of it to produce good and not evil required years of study and discipline.

Kuthu understood this ancient magic, but he used it to further his own personal interests, to spin others into his own web. Di-ur insisted this was not the way to use it, that used this way the result would be suffering for many people and the end result would be certain to bring the suffering back upon the user.

Cause and effect worked as strongly in the moral realm as in the physical realm, Di-ur said, over and over again. Evil done to other men

came back in the end to those who did it.

In the dusk, G'jhil ran to Di-ur. She could not see the color of his clothing but she knew he was wearing the familiar robe of blue. He gathered her into his arms in a fatherly hug and she would feel the touch of the metal bangles on his upper arms.

"My dear child! Are you all right?" Di-ur asked.

"Of course. But I did have a funny experience." She told him about the instant during which she had seemed to be a young woman in some future time. He listened closely, then sighed with relief.

"I am so glad the transit was managed without distress to you," Di-ur said. "I was—well, I was worried."

"You had something to do with it?" G'jhil asked.

"A little. It was really managed by those of my brotherhood. But I was concerned. Working with forces of such magnitude and of such subtlety, one is never quite sure of the result. And when one must risk the future of many thousands of years—" His voice went into silence.

"So long a time is being risked?"

"Yes, my dear. In this night that is now beginning, the future of many thousands of years hangs in the balance for us, for most of the people of this city."

A somber mood was on him.

"Tell me about it," she whispered, awed.

"There is much to say and little time in which to say it," he replied. "First, catastrophe comes."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I think it will take the form of a tremendous earthquake, a huge upheaval that will bring devastation."

"Will it strike us?"

"I suspect it will destroy the whole city," the priest answered.

G'jhil gasped with pain at the thought of the suffering that would come. "Are—are you sure?"

"Almost certain. For months our instruments have indicated increasing tremors in the skin of the earth. These proceed from a deep source that seems to be in the sea to the west. I think the islands in this sea will sink. Here we will only feel the fringes of the quake."

His voice had lost its usual calm smoothness and had developed a rasp. This was the first time G'jhil had ever heard the voice of this man reflecting inner conflict. Conflict was in his voice now, coming from the knowledge of pain and of suffering for many, with no escape.

"Kuthu knows of the coming quake," Di-ur continued. "For many months he has been making plans for escape, discarding them as fast as he makes them because of some defect in them. The major defect in each plan is that he sees no way to take his clique, his slaves, his women, and his wealth with him. All of these are important to him. He feels lost and alone without a circle of admirers around him. Without women to satisfy the animal side of his nature, he develops strange fevers. Without slaves, he would be helpless. Without wealth he cannot command the services of men."

The shouting was nearer. Di-ur paused to listen to it.

"They run like hounds on my trail," he whispered.

"They are hunting you?" G'jhil gasped. "They would not dare!"

"Kuthu would dare if he thought I had something of sufficient value to him. He fears me, because of what he thinks is my magic but which I know to be hard-won knowledge of the laws of nature. But his fear of what is coming is greater than his fear of me, and if he thinks I have something that will help him escape, he will have me hunted."

"How does he intend to escape?"

Di-ur was silent, pondering the words he wanted to use. He knew what he wanted to say but he also knew the difficulty in explaining the seeming paradoxes that were involved. The minds of men were easily confused

when the talk was of time.

"His best plan is to flee to the future," he said.

"To the future? Through time? How can this be?" G'jhil asked.

"It can be done, if you know how. It can even be done safely if you are sufficiently pure in heart to face the future without fear. You cannot move into any future time. But you can leap forward through what has been called looped time making jumps of about a thousand years in length?"

"In a physical body?"

"No, dear one. The physical body must stay where it is in time. But each of us possesses a second body. I have told you about this before—"

"I remember." She was silent. Wonder about the universe in which she lived was in her. At one and the same instant, it was utterly bewildering in its strangeness and as simple and as comfortable as a pair of old shoes. How could the same thing be both strange and familiar? She decided the strangeness or the familiarity rose from the way one looked at things.

"It is this second body which can be projected into time. This second body holds the memories, it also has its own organs of perception... But, enough of natural philosophy. I am telling you this for one reason. Your father has decided to leave tonight. He will take you, of course, and his trusted servants."

"Leave?" Her voice was sharp. "Leave my home? And— I can't leave Cethn. I—I love him."

"I understand, my dear. Your father wants Cethn to go with you."

Relief rose in her. Wherever Cethn was, there was where she wanted to be. "And you are coming with us too!"

For a moment, Di-ur was silent, then he shook his head. "I will be needed here. Shall I flee and let the ones who loved and trusted me suffer alone when perhaps a hand might be given to help them?" His voice reflected pain. "Also, at this moment, I do not know whether or not Kuthu will let me escape."

"But some of the ones who loved and trusted you are going," G'jhil said quickly. "They will need you too!"

He patted her hand. "I know. But the greater need will be here." He paused and listened to the sounds of the night, then kissed her gently on the forehead.

"I must go now. Your father has gone to make certain the horses are available. He wants to leave two or three at a time, pretending you are leaving now for a hunting trip on the desert at dawn. He will go ahead. He wants you and Cethn to follow."

"I—of course."

"Good-bye, my dear."

She heard his footsteps vanish in the direction of the door in the garden wall. For an instant, she stood irresolute in the darkness, her heart pulled in two directions, then she made up her mind and went quickly into the house. Servants, busy trying to pack small personal things, told her that her father had said she should don riding garments in readiness for a dawn hunt.

Anxiety was in G'jhil. Sensing this, her old nurse moved to her. As she had done since she was born and her mother had died, she threw herself into the arms of the old woman, who petted and soothed her.

"As soon as you have changed into riding clothes, go into the garden and wait for Cethn," the old nurse said. "We will do everything inside that can be done. What was that?"

Alarm showed on her face as a rumble went through the house. It was a small earth tremor.

"That's the first warning," the old nurse said. She pushed G'jhil toward the back door. "Go into the garden, dear, and wait for Cethn."

With terror rising in her heart, G'jhil went into the garden, arriving there just in time to hear the back gate opening in the darkness. Thinking it was Cethn, she ran toward the sound, then stopped. In the night, she could hear a man panting.

"Cethn?" she called softly.

"It is Di-ur," a man's voice answered.

"Di-ur? Are you—are you hurt?" She ran to him.

"Just out of breath," the old priest answered. "I did a little running." He paused to catch his breath. "They are hunting me," he said.

"What for?" G'jhil said, sharply.

"They have their reasons. My dear, I want you to do something for me—"

"Of course! Anything!"

"Take this."

She felt him press something into her hand. Small and warm to the touch, she thought it was a jewel.

"It's not really a jewel," Di-ur said, as if he was reading her mind. "It is the vital control element of a machine that uses energies which most people of our time do not know exist. I—I stole it!"

The thought that this priest would steal anything startled her into silence.

"Yes. From Kuthu's secret workshop in the bottom of that cursed tower in his palace grounds, I stole it. In my own heart, I am completely justified in this theft. Without it, his power is greatly reduced. His men are hunting me, to regain it."

The sound of shouting came again, closer now, outside the walls.

"They do not know I came in here. I will slip out and steal away into the darkness," Di-ur said. "You keep the little green stone, all of your life. Give it to your oldest son. Tell him to give it to his oldest son. Tell him it will bring him luck."

He kissed her again, on the forehead, the door creaked, and slid away into the darkness of the now doubly-haunted night. In her hand, G'jhil held something that seemed to pulse with a life of its own. Then a voice

was calling to her from the direction of the house. Cethn's voice.

With alarm in it.

IX

Dr. Riker, in Gael Dana's apartment, knew he had two apparently lifeless bodies on his hands. For Los Angeles, the night was cool. In addition, the air conditioning system was working and cool air was flowing into the room in a silent, invisible breeze. In spite of this, there was sweat on his face and sweat all over his body.

The sweat on his body was a reflection of the sweat on his soul.

As a physician, he had seen death in many forms and in many disguises. He had examined the bodies of men who had died of gunshots and of stab wounds, including the twisted, tortured wreckage that was left of dope addicts who had stumbled their last weary mile in search of the fix they, had needed so desperately—and had found the fix of death instead. He had also seen the bodies of suicides who had gone from life in a last pathetic defiance of it.

Death was not new to him. Nor was it an enemy. To Dr. Riker, if a man had lived his life and had done his work and had completed the growth allotted to him, then death could come as a welcome friend.

But this young man and this young woman had not fulfilled themselves. He did not want them to die. He wanted to save them, somehow, somehow.

What would save them?

He paced the floor of the apartment, going from the windows overlooking the patio to the rear windows, which overlooked the garage for the cars of the residents of this building. Out there in an alley, a lone street light glared defiance at the darkness.

In the patio pool in front, a swimming party was in progress. Girls were giggling down there and men were laughing in the ancient, but ever-new

love play between the sexes. Now and then water splashed as someone was pushed into the pool.

He hardly heard the sounds. His mind was on the problem of Gael and Keth, how to help them.

Turning at the back window in his restless pacing, he hardly noticed the tan truck pass under the street light and stop in such a way that the back end was pointed toward the building. His eyes saw the truck, but his mind did not register its meaning, beyond the vague thought that perhaps some plumber was out late on overtime pay.

When he realized the real meaning of the tan truck in the alley, shock came up in him. He knew he had to act. Going to the telephone in Gale's bedroom, his intention was to call the police.

He was already dialing for the operator when he realized there was no dial tone in the receiver. He jiggled the cradle. No click came in the receiver.

His thought was that the phone was out of order. Going through the connecting door to the apartment he had rented, he picked up the telephone there.

It was dead too.

He realized then that the phone connections had been broken. What he did not know was that in old buildings such as this, telephone connections ran to a connector block at the rear of the building. To stop service on any phone all that was necessary was to remove the cover from the big connector block. There before your eyes would be the telephone connections to all apartments, each one neatly numbered. All that had to be done to stop service was to remove the connectors. The phone would then go dead.

One phone dead might be accident. Two phones out of order meant something else. Dr. Riker stood in the quiet apartment holding the useless instrument in one hand. He was so engrossed in his two patients that his mind refused to grapple with the problem of the telephones.

A soft click from Gael Dana's apartment caught his ear. He did not know what the click meant but he went hastily into Gael's apartment to

ascertain its source.

The click had come from the use of a skeleton key in the door leading to the hall. Four people had entered the apartment.

At the sight of them, Dr. Riker tried to draw back. He was too slow in moving. The fat man who waddled like a duck caught sight of him. Dr. Riker had never seen a pistol drawn so quickly. It appeared in the fat man's hand as if by magic.

"Don't go anywhere, you." the fat man said. Dr. Riker was paralyzed by the sight of the weapon and even more paralyzed by what he saw in the fat man's eyes. The expression in the eyes told him that this fat man who looked so jovial and friendly was actually a sadistic killer. Dr. Riker stood still.

Two women and two men had entered the apartment. The second man was now coming toward him. The last time he had seen this man had been in his office when J. Eller was begging for psychiatric help.

The body, the hawk nose, were those of J. Eller. But the hot eyes were those of Kuthu. The personality of J. Eller had vanished. The Kuthu personality was completely dominant.

"The great head doctor, eh?" Kuthu said. "In my time, you would have sat in the dust outside my palace begging for copper coins."

"In my time, which is where we are, you will be confined in a madhouse!" Dr. Riker answered.

The hot rage of affronted arrogance glinted in Kuthu's eyes. Mixed with the rage, however, was a touch of fear which had been aroused by the physician's words. The fear made Kuthu cautious. He glanced at Cal as if he was thinking of turning loose his sadistic killer. Cal, the fat man, looked eager. But Kuthu changed his mind and pointed toward Gael Dana on the couch and Keth Ard on the floor.

"What has happened to them?"

"I'm not sure," Dr. Riker answered. "Frankly, I do not know."

"Come now. You're a doctor. You're supposed to know."

"Doctors don't know everything!"

"Are they dead? You surely know that much!"

"I think every doctor in the city would be willing to certify that they are," the physician answered.

"Did you kill them?"

"I did not!" Dr. Riker answered. "I am a physician. My duty is to save life, not to take it."

Kuthu looked at Cal. "Search the place," he said. "Both apartments."

In spite of the fact that he waddled like a duck when he walked, Cal moved with surprising speed. He went past Dr. Riker and into the adjoining apartment. Closet doors could be heard slamming in there. Returning to Gael's apartment, he searched the two bedrooms, then reported to Kuthu.

"Why has she got two bedrooms, Doc?" Kuthu demanded.

"I believe her brother lives with her." Riker answered.

"Brother? Oh, yes." Memory flicked across Kuthu's eyes, then was gone. "Him!" he said. He dismissed the matter of the missing brother from his mind as being a solved problem.

"Just the three of you in these two apartments, is that right?" Kuthu asked Riker.

"Yes."

"You got out of your office building okay?"

"Yes."

"There was a fourth person with you, a woman. Where is she?"

"That was my receptionist. I assume she is at home," Dr. Riker answered.

These answers seemed to satisfy Kuthu. But he had something else on

his mind, something that had brought him here.

"That little chunk of green stone you showed me in your office, where is that?" Kuthu asked.

Dr. Riker instantly grasped that the whole purpose of this intrusion was to find the Arthen Stone. He knew also that this was the thread on which his life hung—and the lives of his two patients also. The Arthen Stone was the only bargaining point he had.

"What?" he asked, as if the question confused him. His shrug was perfect, neither too elaborate nor too indifferent. It conveyed the impression that he could not see why this was important. "Oh. Yes. We didn't have time to think about such things when we left the building. I assume it was destroyed in the fire or washed away by the hoses of the firemen."

He shrugged again, a gesture which said he had more important things on his mind.

Kuthu looked at him from enigmatical, appraising eyes. All trace of the vacillating personality of J. Eller, who owned and operated a curio shop, had vanished. If even a whisper of the mental function of Eller remained anywhere, it was not visible.

"What was that chunk of rock?" the physician asked. His manner was that of a man asking an unimportant question. "Why did you change so quickly when you saw it?"

"Why did you show it to me?" Kuthu answered.

"Just an idea I had."

"Where did you get the stone?"

"One of my patients brought it to me."

"Which one?"

"Is that important?"

"It's important if I think it is," Kuthu answered. He pointed to Gael lying on the couch. "This is the patient who brought it to you."

"As a matter of fact, yes. But I don't see what difference it makes. She wanted to know what it was."

"She knows what it is. She stole it from me!" Kuthu said.

"Then she knows more about it than she revealed to me," the physician answered. "As to the ownership of it, if it belongs to you, you may have it, if you can find it among the ruins of my building."

Kuthu studied Dr. Riker in silence for a moment, then glanced at the two women with him. For the first time, the physician became fully aware of them. One had black eyes, one had green eyes. Both were well dressed. Both were studying him with such intentness that it seemed to him they were looking into the depths of his mind. He saw at a glance the primitive nature of these two women. All women, in his experience, exhibited a primitive quality, but these two women had it in maximum degree. It was as if something in them belonged to the days when the earth was far more primitive in all of its aspects, when life was simple and intense—and crude and violent. Looking at these women, Dr. Riker suspected they were more dangerous than the two men. To him, they seemed to have rattlesnakes and scorpions in their hearts.

As they watched him, he could hear the snake tails rattling and see the scorpion eyes watching him.

"He's lying!" the woman with the green eyes spoke, words that sounded like the spitting of an angry cat.

"That's what I thought," Kuthu said. He turned to the physician. "Where is it?"

Kuthu nodded toward the green-eyed Jarla. "She's my witch, Doc. She can read minds. She smells things for me. If she says you're lying, that's the way it is."

Dr. Riker regarded the green-eyed Jarla with sudden professional interest. If she could do what Kuthu claimed, how he would like to probe the depths of her mind! A real witch! Then, sadly, he remembered he had no office in which to do psychological probing, and no instruments, and even if he had had both, it was unlikely that he would have a chance to use them.

"I want that green stone," Kuthu said. "I don't want any arguments."

"But I said—"

"And you lied when you said it!" Kuthu spoke. He glanced at Cal.

The fat man moved very quickly. Grabbing Dr. Riker's arms from behind, he jerked them up behind the physician's back. Pain from tortured shoulder muscles lanced through the doctor's body. He winced at it, and opened his mouth to scream in the faint hope that somebody would hear the sound and would call the police to make an investigation.

It was the black-eyed Shirla who hit him in the mouth with the butt of her palm, a blow that crushed his lips against his teeth and brought the color of blood to his lips and the taste of it to his tongue. The blow shook the scream out of his vocal chords.

Shirla stood ready to deliver a second blow, this time with her fist, if it was needed. Her fists ready, she was posed like a man ready to strike. Seeing the posture, Dr. Riker knew what he was dealing with in her. This fact scared him even more than Kuthu and Cal, who might be expected to act from motives that were understandable. Shirla would rend and destroy for any motive—or with none.

"This green stone is right here in this apartment, Doc," Kuthu said. He gestured toward Gael lying on the couch and Keth on the floor. "This is what it does to people who don't understand how to use it. You've used the Arthen Stone on them."

"I did not," Dr. Riker protested.

Kuthu's eyes fixed him. A puzzled expression appeared on the face of the hawk-nosed man.

"Who are you, Doc?" Kuthu asked. "Just tell me—who are you?"

"I'm Dr. Joseph Riker," the physician said.

"I know that," Kuthu answered. "What I want to know is who were you in the old time?"

Riker understood his meaning. The man called J. Eller was Kuthu at

this moment. As Kuthu, he suspected that Riker was also possessed. He wanted to know who was doing it.

"If I am anybody else, I don't know it," the physician answered. "To me, I seem to be me, the same me I have always been."

This was a rational answer. It was also what he believed to be true.

Kuthu shook his head. "I don't believe that either. It's not easy to be sure, but I think you're somebody else." A plaintive note appeared in Kuthu's voice as if the personality of J. Eller was trying to surface and was begging for sympathy.

"I understand how this can be," Dr. Riker said quickly. He caught the appeal for sympathy and started to build on it. "But what I don't know is why you go to all of this trouble for a piece of green stone."

"I need it," Kuthu said. The plaintive note grew stronger. "Did you ever try to live on what a curio shop owner makes by peddling sex books out the back door?"

"No, but I realize it must be difficult. But if you can work the time transit, why do you choose to be this curio shop owner, why do you pick on this period of time. Why not somebody else sometime in the past."

"I didn't pick out this curio shop dealer, I got him by accident. As to why I picked this time, I can jump about a thousand years but I can't reach the periods between these time nodes. Why didn't I stop farther back?" Kuthu shook his head. "They don't know anything a thousand years in the past. They haven't even discovered electricity and what they call magic is so crude it can't be trusted to work. They're just plain dumb back there."

"Why not the future?"

"I explored that too, a little. I got out of my depth. Up ahead, they know too much. I can't understand their magic. Also, they have forces much finer than electricity that I have never even heard of. In addition, the psychologists seem to have learned a lot in the future. What you suspect to be true, but can't prove, *they know!* If they catch me up in the future—well, they're not gentle in the way they treat you!"

"I see," Dr. Riker said. "You do face a problem, poor fellow. However, why do you go to all of this trouble to get this small piece of green stone?"

"The curio shop owner is a poor man. There's nothing I can do to make him rich. He just doesn't have any instinct for doing anything except clipping a sucker for a couple of bucks. I need money. The equipment I need is expensive. Back in my time, I have money. I need the Arthen Stone because it is the key that will make it possible for me to bring enough jewels from my time to make me rich. Get the picture, Doc?"

"I understand," Dr. Hiker said. He understood at last the motives and the methods of this man who had come across the gulf of time.

What he did not understand was how he was going to stay alive.

"Now you know why I want this little piece of green stone," Kuthu confined. "I don't yet understand how it got here in this time. I thought it was back in my time."

A kind of fear went across the bleak face and was shrugged away by the shoulders.

"But here it is and I want it. If you will co-operate with me, things will work out good for you. I don't forget the people who help me."

A wheedling, pleading note sounded in Kuthu's voice. It too, was shrugged away.

"If you don't co-operate—"

He nodded to Cal. In response, the fat man jerked Dr. Riker's arms higher. The physician felt the pain of tortured muscles increase to agony.

X

G'jhil thrust the little green stone into the top of her riding habit. There, against her breast, she could feel the subtle vibrations flowing from it. These seemed to flow into some nerve center near her heart and to spread from this center over her entire nervous system.

At this moment, she was so concerned with the arrival of Cethn and with the other complications that had so suddenly entered her life that she did not realize the radiations from this little piece of stone were making changes in the neural structure through her whole body, changes that she could not have named if she had felt them, very subtle things, but which in the long run might produce large results. In her time, radioactivity was not even a word and the subtle radiations coming from radioactive substances were not known except to a few master magicians and were very poorly understood—even by them.

Even without a word for it, radioactivity existed.

Cethn was hurrying toward her across the now dark garden, finding his way along the winding paths. She ran to him. He caught her in his arms and kissed her, but not on the forehead.

"My dear, our whole lives are being upset!" he told her.

"I know. Di-ur told me," she answered.

"You are to come with me immediately. We will slip out of the city and join your father—"

As he spoke, there was a thud on the gate at the rear of the garden, the crash of breaking wood. Men carrying torches entered through the broken door, to run swiftly along the winding paths like great hunting dogs loose in the night.

Seeing them coming, G'jhil took the small piece of green stone and hid it under a piece of flagstone in the garden walk.

Men with torches in one hand and drawn swords in the other came toward them. Cethn thrust G'jhil behind him and faced them. She saw he had a hunting bow and a case of arrows over his shoulder, but he made no attempt to draw them. When he spoke to the officer in charge, his voice was as hard and as sharp as the edge of a cutting tool.

"What is the meaning of this?"

The officer in charge drew back a step and held his torch high to see better what he was facing.

"By order of Kuthu, we search for a renegade priest," the officer said.

"Who is Kuthu to be issuing such orders?" Cethn demanded. "Who is he to decide whether or not any priest is a renegade?"

The officer mumbled an unintelligible answer.

"We have laws safeguarding the persons and the property of our citizens," Cethn continued. "As for our priests, only the council can decide if they have been derelict in their duties."

"I understand that," the officer answered. "My orders are to bring him before the council, so they can act on charges that have been brought against him."

This put the matter in what the officer hoped would be a reasonable light. It also gave him a basis in custom and law for his actions.

"Who brought these charges against this priest?" Cethn demanded. "Who is this priest?"

"His name is Di-ur. And Lord Kuthu brought the charges."

"Di-ur! I know him well. A holy man devoted to the welfare of others."

"I merely act upon my orders," the officer protested. "Lord Kuthu himself told me to bring this priest before the council. I am the captain of his guard."

"Captain of his guard! Those are fine-sounding words for killers and looters to hide behind!" Cethn exploded. "I will personally appear before the council to defend Di-ur and also to ask that the matter of Kuthu bringing false charges be investigated. In the meantime, you have no basis in law or custom for breaking into this garden. I want you out of it, instantly Do you understand me?"

Cethn took a step toward the captain who backed away. The officer did not want a dispute with a young noble who could cause trouble for him in the governing council. He also had his orders from Kuthu. He knew the temper of Kuthu too well to risk disobedience. Fortunately for him, one of his men entered through the broken gate, shouting that the priest had been seen fleeing. This gave the officer an excuse for leaving. At his

command, his men followed him.

"What did he want with Di-ur?" Cethn asked.

"I think what they really want is this," G'jhil answered. Lifting the flagstone, she took the small green stone from its hiding place. It was cool now, to the sense of touch, but she could still feel vibrations tingling in it. She put it in Cethn's hand. He fumbled with it in the darkness and returned it to her.

"What is it? Where did you get it?"

"Di-ur gave it to me. He said for me to keep it always and to give it to my oldest son."

"He takes a long view, that priest. Your oldest son! You do not know if we will even be alive tomorrow."

"We hope we will," G'jhil answered. "No one can say more than this."

They went into the house, where G'jhil took her hunting bow and a case of arrows from the wall. Servants were still gathering a few prized possessions. Mixed emotions battled in G'jhil. She was leaving the only home she had ever known, for a new life, perhaps for death. When the earthquake came, this comfortable old home would be a heap of rubble.

Also there was Di-ur's strange talk of the future of thousands of years hanging in the balance this night and his even stranger talk of the nature of time and space. What did she care about the nature of time and space? She just wanted to marry Cethn and raise a family and be happy. As for the young woman with the red hair that she had glimpsed in what now seemed to be a dream, that she had seemed to be, she had no explanation for this.

G'jhil and Cethn went furtively out the side door, like two children fleeing in the night from some strange doom they did not understand. The night had a strange quality of threat about it, a mixture of muffled sounds and of quietness. The air seemed charged with tension. Many people were on the streets, talking in small groups. They had felt the earth tremors, they knew the danger. Rumors of cataclysm were in the air. Most people, trying to cling to the life they had here, were trying to disregard these rumors, were pathetically telling each other that it couldn't happen to

them, that if a quake did come its center would be far away from them and their homes would suffer only minor damage. The streets are safe, they told each other, each one building false hopes in himself and in the others.

Reaching the stables, Cethn and G'jhil found only a few horses left and these in terror. Servants and grooms and G'jhil's father had already taken many mounts as they tried to set up a place of safety in the desert. The horses reared in their stalls, sensing impending doom. Even Cethn, who had a way with horses, had difficulty in saddling his mount. G'jhil found the task impossible. Her favorite mare was in a frenzy. Cethn finally got her saddled.

"We'll lead them, on tight bits, out of the city," he said.

They went out the back door of the stables and into a big alley where hay and grain carts stood in the darkness like strange lost monsters that had settled down here to rest until day came. This part of the city was given over to the care of horses. It had a smell all its own. Talking to their mounts, they tried to soothe them. On a cross street ahead of them, torches went past. Men in formation marched there, men with a captive whose arms were tied behind him.

"It's Di-ur!" Cethn gasped. "They caught him!"

The priest walked with a limp, blood was on his face, his blue robe was torn. In spite of this, there was something proud in the way he walked. The way he held his head seemed to defy the men who had captured him—and the master they served.

G'jhil started forward. Cethn caught her by the shoulder.

"Into the saddle with you," he said.

Before she fully realized what had happened, he had lifted her into the saddle and given her the reins of the mare.

"If fate chooses, Di-ur and I will join you in the desert," he told her.

"But—"

His hand struck the flank of her mare a sharp blow. The fretful animal

lunged away. G'jhil had all she could manage to keep her seat. She was furious with Cethn for sending her away. She knew he was going to try to help Di-ur. Cethn would never turn his back on a friend in trouble. She knew that trying to argue with him about this would have been pointless. While she was furious with him, she also respected him for his action. She tried to turn the mare, but the frightened animal had gotten its head and could neither be turned nor stopped.

Other horses were moving through the streets, and little groups of people, some carrying their possessions, some pushing handcarts. These scattered before the bolting mare.

As the mare carried G'jhil out of the city, she passed near the high-walled estate that was Kuthu's private domain. She caught a glimpse of the square, flat-topped palace that formed a part of the wall, and beyond that, of the twisting tower that rose into the air of night.

Though the tower was dark, she did not doubt that guards watched there. The guards would be Kuthu's men, possibly his slaves, but they were also human. In this city on this night, even Kuthu's men would be uneasy, wondering if before the dawn the earthquake would bring them tumbling down from their twisted tower.

XI

Returning quickly to the stables, Cethn gave his horse to the groom, then ran along the alley to the cross where he had seen Di-ur. The flaring torches were already well down the street. People with handcarts were scurrying to get out of the way of these men. They knew this captain of the guard, they also knew his master. Cethn followed. No plan was in his mind, indeed, he could not formulate a plan until he knew the exact conditions, but he hoped the strong impulse to help would guide him correctly. He did not know the source of this impulse and did not care. It moved him. This was enough. Coming along with the impulse was a haunted feeling, a sense of destiny and of lost memories. It was as if his future was here in the balance. It was pulling at him, trying to guide him, trying to show him what to do.

Could the as-yet unformed future affect the present? Was his future his alone or did it belong in part to someone else? Was something else using him to build its future and his own?

He did not know the answer to these questions. He had heard Di-ur talk many times of the weaving of men and of events into a vast tapestry that was being woven for them and about them by the higher forces interested in and to some degree controlling the destinies of men. Di-ur was a mystic. Somewhere in Di-ur was also the heart and the soul of a poet. His language was the language of poetry, the talk of a human who had glimpsed what most men miss, the offstage and out-of-sight puppet master who may possibly be in charge of the show which involves men and mice and worlds.

Was there a puppet master who also wanted men eventually to be free of their strings, wanted them to be wise enough and to have enough love in them to set up their own puppet show somewhere in the vastness of the great universe?

Cethn saw that Di-ur still walked with his head erect. If there was an invisible puppet master in charge of this priest, then this master was giving his puppet the courage to face death without fear. If Di-ur died, would he be woven into the pattern of another puppet show in some far-off time and distant place? Would the heart and the soul of the priest be saved to be used by the puppet master as an ornament of some show in another age?

Perhaps even the puppet master did not know the answer to these questions, had not as yet made up his mind about them. Which of the puppets would be saved for tomorrow's show, which would be discarded as too warped for further use? In a world where magic had become a science would they know more about these strange matters?

Cethn saw ahead of them the great gates in the high wall that surrounded Kuthu's palace. The gates swung inward to admit the captain of the guard and his men, also to admit a priest in a blue robe who walked as if he feared neither death nor torture.

Cethn tried to pass through the gates as if he was the last member of the guard, but the gateman yelled at him and he turned back. To do otherwise would be to invite a spear thrust through the belly.

Turning, he walked around the high wall made of baked brick and reinforced with stone. The other gates might not be so well guarded, he hoped, particularly on a night like this when the earth was threatening to turn upside down and the sky was trying to fall down.

The main palace was a sprawling building that covered acres. Its back wall was a part of the wall that circled the entire area. Heavy doors in this wall were used to bring supplies directly into the palace. One of these doors was open. Cethn went through it unchallenged. To his right, a passage led to the great kitchens. To his left, another passage led to the garden in front of the palace. Serving women carrying great platters of food used this left passage when Kuthu chose to dine in the garden. Cethn went left. He was inside the walls.

Along the inner wall to his left were barracks for guards, huts for women, compounds for slaves, and stalls for horses. To his right, behind a hedge was the garden. He entered this. Efforts had been made to create an imitation paradise. These efforts had failed. Kuthu's gardeners complained that a curse was on this place. The rarer blooms would not grow here, water turned stagnant here quicker than in other places, dangerous snakes and venomous insects seemed to be more prevalent here than elsewhere. Or so the rumors said. Men feared this place, even those who served Kuthu. Cethn went into the garden, sliding through the shrubbery, breathing air that stank of decay. The garden was deserted, but behind the hedge he could hear occasionally the voices of soldiers off-duty and of women quarreling.

The soldiers and the women were fretful. They sensed trouble coming, felt it in their bones, heard it in the slight tremors of the earth. To a man, the soldiers wanted nothing so much as the chance to slip out the gates and move to the desert. If the quake came, the desert would be safest. But if it did not come—well, there would be Kuthu to be reckoned with on the morrow.

Going through the garden, Cethn stayed out of sight and watched what was happening at the main door of the palace. There a fat eunuch clad in proud silk was in charge. With two guards to back up his authority, the eunuch was checking those who entered and left. Above him, on both sides of the big doorway, flaring torches plumed reluctant smoke into the night.

Cethn walked out, of the garden and straight up to the main door.

"I bring an important message for Lord Kuthu," he told the eunuch.

Sweating inwardly and outwardly, this creature hardly bothered to notice a person whom he regarded as some hunter from the desert. Probably the fellow had come to tell Kuthu about a new herd of antelope. Didn't he know that Kuthu was too busy to waste time on hunting trips?

"Can't see him, he's busy, go away, you'll have to wait until tomorrow," the eunuch said, all in one breath.

"There may be no tomorrow," Cethn said.

The eunuch shrugged. Tomorrow to him would be like yesterday, which had been nothing at all.

"If you hold me up, Lord Kuthu will have your hide flayed from your fat carcass," Cethn said.

"That is strong talk," the eunuch said, spitting. He glanced at the two guards lounging beside the doorway.

"These are strong times," Cethn answered. "The message has to do with the priest in the blue robe who was just taken into the palace."

"He was taken directly to Lord Kuthu," the eunuch answered.

"Then have me taken to Lord Kuthu," Cethn answered.

"With a hunting bow over your shoulder and a stabbing dagger at your belt?" the outraged eunuch demanded. "Where do you come from that you do not know that no armed man goes into Kuthu's presence? If I let you go armed to him, he would have both of us skinned alive."

"You have a knife up your sleeve," Cethn said.

"I—How did you know?" The eunuch was startled. He had thought the knife well hidden. "So what? I am the palace master. You are a no-name come out of the night."

People were entering and leaving through the main door, slaves with burdens going in both directions. While he was talking to Cethn, the eunuch was frantically trying to check each of these. He was out of breath and out of patience.

"Get out of my sight before I have you run through with a spear!" he screamed at Cethn.

At the eunuch's signal, one of the guards lounging against the wall beside the door lifted his spear. The expression on his face said he would enjoy nothing more than an order to run the point through the guts of this persistent intruder in a haunted night. The writhing of a man dying on a spear shaft would add one more touch of horror to a night already moving toward the saturation point. The guard would enjoy this.

Cethn drew back. The guard looked disappointed. The eunuch was busy checking a huge basket carried by a fat woman who was trying to waddle out of the palace. Cethn stepped back away from the door and into the garden.

He started to continue around the building, then discovered that this wing was the women's wing, where Kuthu kept his concubines. The eunuchs on guard here were more alert. Cethn knew better than to attempt to enter this wing of the palace. A male intruder here was speared first, then, if he was still alive, he was emasculated, then questions were asked of him, perhaps.

Retracing his steps, Cethn went back to the passage he had used to enter the garden, went through it, and into the kitchen. Whole oxen were brought in and were slaughtered here. He passed a series of bloody hooks and found himself in a place that smelled of blood and ordure and of fear. Passing this, he entered a huge room that smelled of roasting meat. A whole oxen was turning on a spit. A lean cook was on duty. His attention was engrossed by the two slaves who were chained to a treadmill that turned the spit. Their broad backs went up and down, up and down, revealing red marks on the skin. If they worked too slow, the cook used the whip. If they turned the spit too fast, they got the whip again.

There was an air of resignation about these broad backs. The slaves had heard the rumors. If the quake came and the palace collapsed about them, they would be buried in the rubble. In this way, and only in this way, could they be released from the treadmill that turned the spit.

The lean cook paid no attention to Cethn. Perhaps this hunter was coming to bargain with the head chef for a supply of venison. In any event, the guards had passed him through the gate. His presence inside the palace was no concern of cooks.

Cethn went up winding rear stairs that took him eventually to the roof. Here Kuthu often lounged in the cool of the evening, enjoying himself in games with the women. Rugs and soft pillows were scattered everywhere.

No one was lounging here tonight. Kuthu had something other than women on his mind.

In the middle of the roof was a large, round opening, which served the double purpose of letting light into the room below and of providing a means for venting the hot, foul air from below. Cethn went to the edge of this skylight, then drew hastily back to make certain he would not be seen.

Below, in what was a throne room, was Kuthu. Below was Di-ur. Below was also the captain of the guard and four of his men. Di-ur was held by two men, each with a grip on one arm. Striding back and forth in front of the priest was Kuthu, who was speaking in a voice as hot as the burning beam from the *thegnar*.

"You will either reveal where you have hidden the Arthen Stone or here and now, before my eyes, I will have you skinned alive!"

Looking down, it was difficult for Cethn to estimate Di-ur's reaction to this threat, but it seemed to him that the priest stood a little straighter, held his chin a little higher.

"And then, Kuthu?" Di-ur asked.

"And then, if you are still alive, I will have molten lead poured into the stumps of your ears!" Kuthu said.

"And then?" Di-ur answered.

"Then I will have your tongue torn out by the roots!"

"And then?" Di-ur repeated.

"Then you will be dead!" Kuthu screamed.

"And then?" Di-ur said, in the same soft voice.

The hawk-nosed man was silent. Some glimmer of the meaning of the endlessly repeated question must have entered his mind.

"And then, from the other side of death, I will follow you in your attempt to flee through time," Di-ur said softly. "I will bring you, and all of your works, to nothing."

Kuthu drew back a step.

"How did you know what I am doing?" he demanded.

"I know many things. I am one of a great brotherhood. We make it our business to know of such affairs. I also know you can't really make your time flights work without the green stone that you seek from me. It is the key to what you think of as your secret magic," Di-ur answered.

"Those words have sealed your doom!" Kuthu said.

"If you have my tongue torn out, I will not be able to tell you where the green stone is hidden," Di-ur answered.

"Long before you die, you will scream out its hiding place," Kuthu said.

On the roof, Cethn jerked the hunting bow from his back. Swiftly, he slipped the bowstring into place, then jerked an arrow from its case. An arrow in the throat of Kuthu! This was the only thought in his mind.

As he drew back the bowstring, he felt the burning sensation begin on his back. In this split second, he realized what he had forgotten—the twisting tower in the sky. Someone up there was using the *thegnar*. Someone in the tower had seen him on the roof.

At low power, to keep from destroying the palace, the *thegnar* beam was on him.

As the burning sensation struck him, he released the arrow downward. It struck he knew not where. The shaft brought a startled shout from the room below, telling him that within seconds men would be on the roof seeking him.

The *thegnar* beam told him that what they would find would be a man burning to death unless he moved very fast.

Pain was in his back, pain that seemed to increase with every throb of the heart that brought blood from the burned area. He moved very

quickly, dodging out of the direct beam. On the roof wind was beginning to blow. Rugs and cushions were tumbling before it. On the stairs leading to the roof, men shouted as they came upward. He ran to the back of the palace. If he jumped from the roof, he would be out of the range of the burning beam. The drop below him was at least forty feet. He threw the bow down, lowered himself over the wall so that he was clinging by his fingertips, then let go and dropped.

The rough bricks of the wall tore at his skin and at his face, ripping his clothes. He hit with a jarring thud. One ankle turned under him. Pain as sharp as the stab of a knife went through his leg. He got to his feet, the leg buckled under him, and he fell heavily. His fingers found the bow he had dropped. He used the stout wood as a crutch to pull himself to his feet. Up above him a bowstring throbbed and an arrow crunched into the ground near him.

Using the bow, he limped across the cleared area behind the palace. On the edge of the roof men shouted. Arrows thudded into the ground. They were shooting into darkness; they could not see him, but they could catch the sound of his dragging foot, perhaps hear his labored breathing. With arrows following him, he stumbled across the cleared area behind the palace and into narrow streets that ran between rows of thatched huts, the dwelling places of slaves trusted enough to live outside the palace walls or too old to work. This was a place of foul smells, of ground slippery with refuse. In the huts alarmed slaves stirred like frightened animals aroused in their dens. From one hut a shout of alarm arose. The frightened animals stirred.

Cethn ran along the slippery path. The pain in his leg was growing sharper. It was reaching the muscles of his chest, twisting a red-hot poker there. Breathing was becoming more and more difficult.

Falling, he found he could not rise. So he crawled. How far he crawled he did not know. The shouts of the alarmed animals housed in huts were behind him. He found a narrow path and crawled along it. The pain from his leg leaped up his spinal column until it reached his head. It seemed to explode there in a ball of light. He thought he would stop crawling and rest for an instant. He did not know when he passed out.

He awakened to hear someone frantically whispering his name in his ear. It was the voice of someone he knew, someone he loved. It was calling him back to the world of mice and men and planets. He did not wish to

return to this world. He wanted to stay where he was. He tried to tell the voice to go away. It would not go away. It kept calling to him, begging him to wake up, pleading with him. Something pulled at his arms. Pain jolted through his leg. This awakened him. Vaguely, he saw that the light of dawn was in the sky.

What had happened to the night?

"Darling, darling..."

G'jhil's voice was calling to him, G'jhil was pulling at his arms, trying to move him. A groom was bending over. In the background two horses were moving restlessly.

He stared at G'jhil's face, dim in the dawn light. He was not sure that this was really G'jhil. She should not be here. She should be in the desert where she would be safe.

"I—I sent you to the desert," he said, accusingly.

"I—I didn't go. We came back to find you. I knew you were hurt. We—we've hunted for you for hours. Darling, are you able to stay on a horse? We simply can't stay here. The whole city is aroused."

Cethn thought of the miracle of her return to search for him. He thought also of the miracle of her finding him. Had the off-stage puppet master directed her to him? Or had love been the golden thread that had guided her? He did not know the answer, all he knew was that he felt good because she had found him, so very good he was sure he could get to his feet and walk.

He got to his feet. Even if he felt good, his leg did not share this feeling. It collapsed under him. He fell on his face. He heard G'jhil call sharply to the groom to help him. Between them, they got him to his feet.

"Darling, if you can't ride, we'll hide," G'jhil said.

"I'll ride," he mumbled.

"We brought your horse from the stables," she said.

They led him to the horse. Cold sweat was all over his body before he

was in the saddle. He clung there, holding on with both hands, swaying, watching the dawn world go around outside him. Pain was in his leg. He ignored it. He forced the world to stop going round and round. The groom handed the reins up to him. He took them in one hand, with the other hand he gripped the saddle. The horse began to move as if it knew exactly what was required of it now. He caught a glimpse of G'jhil and the groom scrambling to their saddles of their mounts. His horse began to trot. The jolting pain in his leg became agony. The horse slipped into the easier stride of a lope. Sweat on his body, he held on to the saddle.

Though dawn was in the sky, the air seemed to be filled with a black murk like low-hanging clouds. Most people in this city had not slept the past night. They had remained in the streets watching and waiting. Many had already gone to the desert. The air was hot and oppressive with a kind of tingle in it.

Both earth and sky seemed to be waiting, waiting, waiting... for something, for some signal, for some stimuli.

They reached the desert. A long rise was ahead of them. They topped it to look back. Below them was the murk-filled city.

"We're safe, darling," G'jhil said, relief in her voice.

Her face was dirty and streaked with what he suspected had once been tears. But happiness was rising in her eyes.

Rising above the murk of the city was the twisting tower of Kuthu, like a lighthouse of hatred in the dawn. As he saw it, Cethn felt his skin prickle. Then he saw moving toward them what looked like a vast, twisting tornado of dust.

"The *thegnar* beam!" he whispered. "Someone in the tower has seen us!"

The beam came ahead of the dust. It was upon them. It struck them. The horses bolted, fleeing from this burning madness that had come from nowhere. Cethn went out of the saddle, falling heavily. Seeing him fall, G'jhil threw herself from the saddle too.

He could not move. She pulled him to the protection of a small rocky ledge rising above the sand. Here the *thegnar* beam could not reach them

directly. They crouched behind the ledge. Over their heads went a tornado of roaring wind. Dust choked and blinded them. They clung to each other.

Coming from somewhere was a vast throbbing sound, like a gigantic animal in pain. The ground under them began to tremble like an animal aware that horror was coming but unable to escape from it. The sound became that of a vast tidal wave. But this wave was in the crust of the earth itself.

Cethn felt the ground jump under him. He felt it move up and down.

As if the beam of the *thegnar* had been the signal for which it had waited, the earthquake had come!

The quake was a tumbling, twisting, rolling roar in the ground. The earth jumped, it twisted, it leaped, it rolled. The sound was flung up to the sky, which wanted no part of this horror, and flung it back as an echo to the ground below.

Drowned in the roar of the quake itself were the rumble of falling buildings in the city and the cries of people in terror as death came upon them.

It was as if the earth itself was ridding its skin of the pest of the city, of the people that had infected it, shaking them off of it, shaking them into death, as a dog shakes fleas from his hide.

Like children caught in a horror they had not created and from which they had not been wise enough to flee in time, Cethn and G'jhil clung to each other.

Around them the desert moved up and down like the waves of the sea.

XII

As the pain in his tortured shoulder muscles increased under the pressure the fat man was putting on his arms, Dr. Riker had to fight to keep from screaming.

"Are you going to tell me where you have hidden the Arthen Stone?" Kuthu asked.

"I'm not going—to tell you anything!" The physician choked out the words in gulping sounds. Physically, he was a frail man. Emotionally and psychically, he was a very sensitive man. He had to be keenly alert and sensitive in order to recognize and deal with the subtle nuances of inappropriate emotion in his patients. The pain of torture hit this sensitivity. The effect of it was like the explosion of a miniature atom bomb inside his solar plexus. His whole stomach went into spasm. As the sensitive nerve center of the solar plexus reacted to the grinding waves of pain being fed into it, the whole intestinal tract tried to tie itself into knots. The fight or flight mechanism of the adrenal glands went into action, pouring hormones into the blood stream.

Cal jerked his arms even higher. The pain grew sharper.

His heart beat jumped. He was aware of blood roaring in his head. The roar grew louder. Blackness came in with the roar and he slumped forward, face down. Cal released his hold. The physician fell face down on the floor.

"You killed him too damned soon!" Kuthu shouted.

"He just fainted," Cal protested. "Sometimes they do that."

The fat man's manner was indifferent. Perhaps he felt a little cheated. With his victim unconscious, he could not enjoy his suffering.

"Then bring him to," Kuthu said.

Cal waddled to the kitchen, to return with a glass of water, which he splashed on the head of the physician, then went back for more. Returning, he rolled Dr. Riker on his back. The second glass of water went into the physician's face.

Kuthu sat down and lit a cigarette. He became aware again of the young woman lying on the couch and of the young man lying on the floor. Dr. Riker choked and made gulping sounds.

"He's stubborn," Cal said. "I've seen this stubborn kind die before they talk."

"Bring him to," Kuthu repeated. "I've got another idea."

The big building was still. Somewhere in the apartment Kuthu was aware of a clock striking. He counted the chimes: four. The night was passing. The pressure of time, already heavy on him, was growing heavier. In the back of his mind, censored memories were trying to surface, adding to the pressure. He dropped the cigarette and lit another without bothering to pick up the one he had dropped.

Kuthu did not like the memories in his mind. The personality of J. Eller, curio shop owner, was far away. He wanted to keep it far away. However, it was always hovering in the background somewhere, like a ghost trying to gain admission to its own house.

Other memories were in Kuthu's mind, plus many question marks. Something had happened long ago. He could not remember what it was. This event was like a second ghost in his mind but unlike J. Eller, it was not trying to gain admittance. Instead it was staying away.

He recognized it for what it was—a memory he had never had. Something had happened. It had happened to him. He did not have it as a memory because he had not been conscious when it had taken place. Like a ghost, this memory he had never had haunted him. It had something to do with a man in a blue toga, who had defied him.

On the floor, Dr. Riker sputtered and passed a trembling hand across his face. His gaze went around the room. His eyes were out of focus as yet and he could not see clearly. As his vision cleared, he became aware of Kuthu, sitting in the chair. Like a man who sees a nightmare horror which he wishes to dispel, the physician passed a hand again across his eyes. When he looked again, Kuthu was still there.

"Are you ready to talk?" Kuthu said.

"Talk? About what? What happened? I am confused," Dr. Riker answered. He was telling the truth. Sensitive nerve centers had been badly jarred. His mind felt as if it was out of focus. He felt like a sleepwalker awakening on the roof of a tall building who does not know how he has gotten into this strange predicament, but who knows his next step may take him to his death.

"Stalling won't get you anywhere," Kuthu said.

"I'm not stalling," Dr. Riker whispered.

"Where is the Arthen Stone? This *is* your last chance," Kuthu said.

"I—I don't know," Dr. Riker answered. He was telling the truth. The confusion in his mind was so great he could not remember where he had hidden it.

Kuthu glanced up at the green-eyed Jarla, then nodded toward Gael Dana unconscious on the couch.

"Get busy, Jarla!" he said.

As the green-eyed woman moved toward Gael, Dr. Riker grasped her intention. He got quickly if shakily to his feet, calling out sharply for Jarla to stop.

"Jarla has claws on the ends of her fingers," Kuthu said. "She will scratch that woman's eyes out."

"No!" Dr. Riker whispered.

"Then talk!" Kuthu said.

Jarla stood waiting.

The physician looked at Gael on the couch. What he saw there made him forget all about Kuthu and Jarla. Gael's chest was rising... and falling...

"She's breathing!" he whispered.

"So what?" Kuthu asked.

"So she's regaining consciousness! So she's not dead!"

The words were spoken with the fervid intensity of deep prayer. The physician had had many worries, frantic ones, over the threats and the problems of Kuthu and over the inexplicable mystery that was passing before his eyes, but foremost of all had been worry about his two patients. He was a good physician. He wanted his people to be well, to live full, happy lives. When his patients suffered, he suffered with them. Much of the sweat on his body and on his soul had come from his concern over

Gael and Keth. In some sense, they were his children. In a kind of a way, when they had come to his office like burned and frightened kids, he had adopted them.

Shoving Jarla to one side, he dropped to his knees beside Gael, watching with intent interest the rise and fall of her chest. His fingers went to her wrist. As he held the vein, he felt the pulse quicken and grow stronger under his fingers.

Jarla glanced at Kuthu for orders. He shook his head.

"We'll wait a minute," he said.

Kneeling beside Gael, Dr. Riker saw her open her eyes. For him, this was a happy moment. She was alive, she was well. Taking a second look, he caught his breath. She was alive, but she was not well.

Madness was in her eyes. She stared at Dr. Riker and did not recognize him. Sitting up on the couch, she began to scream in terror and to call for someone named Cethn.

"The burning, burning air!" she whispered. "The quake, the way the ground shakes and trembles! The dust! I can't breathe! Cethn, where are you?"

Cal's hand over her mouth stopped the screams. The fat man yelped in pain as she bit him. Cal drew back his fist to hit her. Dr. Riker caught his arm.

Gael's eyes fixed on the hawk-nosed man. She pointed at him. "Kuthu!" she screamed. "Cethn! Where are you?"

Before Cal could free himself from Dr. Riker, she had leaped from the couch.

"Grab her!" Kuthu ordered.

Cal, Jarla, and Shirla leaped to obey him. Catching Gael, Cal jerked one arm behind her. Shirla shoved a pillow over her head, muffling her screams. Twisting, she tried to free herself.

"Choke her if she won't shut up!" Kuthu said. He did not want anyone

in the building to hear the screams and call the cops.

"No!" Dr. Riker shouted.

"The same goes for you, Doc, if you yell like that again!" Kuthu said.

Dr. Riker lowered his voice but did not lessen the intensity of the emotion in it.

"Please! You don't understand what is happening. She is tremendously confused. If we don't handle her with the greatest of care until this confusion is dissolved, she may become permanently insane!"

"I couldn't care less!" Kuthu said.

At this moment, Dr. Riker could have killed the hawk-nosed man with his bare hands.

"But her life, her sanity, her whole future is in danger!"

"She's your patient!" Kuthu said.

"Then make your people leave her alone!"

Kuthu considered the matter, then shrugged. "All right, unless she screams again. If she does, that's all!"

"She won't scream!" Dr. Riker promised.

He shoved Cal and the two women to one side, bent over Gael and gently took the pillow from her face. She looked up at him from eyes that were filled with terror.

"Please listen, my dear!" he said quickly.

She stared at him.

"You remember me. I'm your friend," he said.

Terror was still in her eyes.

"I'm your doctor," the physician said. "I'm trying to help you."

"The earthquake—" she whispered.

"There is no earthquake now," he said.

She looked surprised. "Not now? When is now?" she asked.

This was a question that had often perplexed Dr. Riker too, but he had no intention of admitting it.

"Feel the couch under you," he said. "It is not rocking as it would be doing if there was a quake. Notice the room. It's your own apartment. The pictures are still hanging on the walls, the plaster is not cracked, everything is in place. There has been no quake."

Her eyes obeyed him. She looked around the room. "But there *was* a quake," she whispered. "It was in the desert. I—I was there. The *thegnar* beam struck us... then the quake came. Cethn has broken his leg, I think—" She looked around for Cethn, but did not see him.

Dr. Riker did not have the faintest idea what she was talking about. He suspected she was describing scenes she had seen while she was in the cataleptic state. He did not know whether or not these scenes had ever actually happened, but the important point was that she *thought* they had happened. This made them seem real to her.

He also knew she was in vast confusion as she tried to decide in her own mind what was real and what was not. He suspected that two different personalities, each with its own memories and its own value judgments, were struggling for dominance. If she could synthesize them, blend them into one, she would be sane. If she failed to make this synthesis, the result would be additional conflict and added horror to her.

The madhouses were already full to overflowing. They didn't need another patient!

"Cethn will be all right, my dear," Dr. Riker said. His voice was as gentle and as soft as a dawn breeze. He was comforting a frightened and bewildered child, giving her security. His fingers on her pulse told him that her heart beat was still irregular, too strong at times, too weak at others. He did not know what might happen to her, physically, as a result of the emotional turmoil within her, but the condition of his own inner parts told him that anything could happen from spasm of the heart

arteries to violent nausea. His own spasm was being held in check by the necessity of caring for her.

"But where is Cethn?" she asked. "I love him. I am going to marry him. Where is Di-ur? What happened to him? Was he killed in the earthquake?"

"My dear—"

"Where is my father? He went on ahead of us. I want him too."

Tears formed in her eyes. "I love my daddy. Where is he? Don't tell me that he—that he—"

The tears in her eyes washed out the words in her throat.

"I don't know about him as yet," Dr. Riker said. He was moving directly into the fantasy she was presenting, accepting the same time tense she was using—a tense which confused something out of yesterday with the present moment—and accepting as real what she considered to be real, hoping thus to give direction to the fantasy from the inside. He knew no other way to help. To deny the reality of her inner experience would confuse her further. To accept it as real might enable him to lead her out of yesterday and into today.

Only Dr. Riker knew how delicate were the mental-emotional operations he was trying to perform here. He felt like a man walking a log covered with quicksand in the middle of the darkest night. One misstep and Gael Dana would go into the quicksand of mental confusion that might last for the remainder of her life.

Completely ignoring Kuthu, Cal, and the two women, Dr. Riker continued working. To him, the life and sanity of a patient were important. His own life had a secondary importance in his eyes. Perhaps the fact that he put their interests first was why so many patients loved and trusted him.

Gael looked straight at him.

"Who am I?" she asked.

"My dear, who do you think you are?" the physician answered. He had

known this question was coming. It came up in the lives of so many people, usually as a quiet wonder as to who they really were. He had occasionally wondered about it himself. Who was he? Who was anybody? Was anybody more than a name that he wore from birth to death, a combination of letters of the alphabet, a phonetic sound, that each thought of as being himself? Dr. Riker knew each person was more than this but semantics being what they were, many people thought of themselves as being only a name.

"I—sometimes it seems to me that I am a teen-age girl in a tropic garden," Gael answered. "Sometimes I seem to be me, Gael Dana. But my mind shifts, it goes from one girl to the other, so that now I seem to be one, now the other."

"You are Gael Dana," the physician said, firmly but gently. "You live here in this apartment. This is your home."

Relief came into her eyes. "I'm so glad you said that. It helps settle something inside me."

"I know, my dear," Dr. Riker said. His voice was even more gentle. Relief was in it too. He was beginning to dare to hope for her.

"I want both of you to settle something for me," Kuthu's voice came. "I want you to settle on telling me where you have hidden the Arthen Stone."

"*Please!*" the physician exploded, to Kuthu.

"Shut up, Doc!" the hawk-nosed man answered. "I'm tired of fooling around with you. If you want that woman to be sane, all you have to do is produce the Arthen Stone. If you don't produce it, then she will spend the rest of her life in a nut-house."

Kuthu had grasped all too well where his real advantage lay. Torture would not force this stubborn physician to talk. Threatening his patient would!

"But—" Dr. Riker protested.

"I said to shut up!" Kuthu spoke again.

The room was very still. The fat man was ready and waiting for orders.

The two women were also waiting, eagerly, Dr. Riker thought.

On the couch, Gael Dana stared from frightened, puzzled eyes at Kuthu. Just as one confusion was clearing inside her, another confusion was being forced on her, to perplex and torment her. Just as she was beginning to feel herself again, to know who and where she was, her newly won and tenuously held security was being threatened by something new. In talking to Dr. Riker, she had forgotten Kuthu.

Now she remembered him, remembered him not only as she was seeing him in the present, but also remembered him from some lost yesterday, remembered the tall tower from which the blast of burning, electrified air had come! And remembering, she also brought up all of the emotions that had once been associated with this man and with that event.

Fear twisted her face as horror rose inside her.

In the silent room, a soft click sounded. Then a hoarse, choked voice spoke.

"I'll put a bullet through anybody who touches her!"

XIII

Keth Ard was sitting up on the floor. He had a snub-nosed automatic pistol firmly gripped in sweaty, shaky hands. The soft click had come from the release of the safety.

"You forgot to turn me over," Keth said. "The gun was under me all the time."

Cal, the fat man, made a motion toward his jacket, then as the pistol in Keth's hands swung to cover him and he saw in Keth's eyes that he was looking at death, he hastily raised his hands above his head.

"Don't shoot!" he whispered, in a voice that had suddenly become as squeaky as that of a frightened rat.

In the soft chair, Kuthu sat absolutely still. The two women looked as if

they were afraid to move.

"Keth!" Dr. Riker whispered.

"I'm all right, sir," Keth Ard answered. "At least I think I am!"

Sweat was on his body, confusion was swirling like an angry black cloud through his mind. Sharp pain was in one leg. The leg felt as if it had been broken, but glancing down at it he could see no sign of swelling or of the twisting that would go along with a broken bone. Was the pain the way the leg remembered yesterday?

Keth had come very quickly out of the haunted world of yesterday. In this way, he had escaped part of the confusion and the doubt that were threatening Gael's sanity. Part, but not all! When the transit was so swift, there had not as yet been time for his heart to pick up its normal beat and for his bloodstream to begin moving at a normal rate.

The heart was a physical organ, the blood, the arteries, the veins, were physical things. Inertia ruled over them. They began to move slowly and sluggishly, then, as the adrenals went into action, the heart jumped and went much too fast. Keth felt pain bite at his chest. Gasping for breath, he knew this was a physical reaction. It would pass within a minute or two. Or it would kill him! It sent sweat flooding outward on his skin, it brought giddiness to his brain. The whole room seemed to be trying to revolve.

But he knew who he was and where he was and what he was facing and that he had a gun in his hands which he must be able to use if he were to stay alive. No rocket ship in flight had ever made him quite as giddy as this, but rocket ship testing had also built enough flexibility into his physical-emotional structure, into his arteries and his veins, to enable him to withstand the giddiness. Somewhere inside he was glad for the tough training program that had made him a test pilot. With a less arduous background, he would have passed out.

He nodded toward Cal and spoke to Dr. Riker.

"Get the fat man's gun. Search the others, including the purses of the women."

He bit his lips to fight the pain in his heart. The pain in his leg was reducing. Was his leg now forgetting the pain it had felt in some lost

yesterday? His back felt as if it had been burned. Memories of the horror somewhere in his past were trying to come into his mind, knocking for admission like frightened ghosts trying to find a lodging place but giving no regard to the rights of the tenant already in possession. He refused admission to these ghosts.

Cal had a gun in a shoulder holster. He had another in his side pocket. Dr. Riker got both. The purses of the women each yielded a small automatic pistol. Kuthu was not armed.

Dr. Riker stared in dismay at the weapons he had collected.

"Give 'em to me," Keth said. "And get back to work helping Gael. She needs you."

As Dr. Riker gave them to him, Keth slid the guns into his pockets. He did not attempt to rise from the floor. He looked at Kuthu and at Cal and at the two women.

"I'll kill the first person who moves!" he said. There was no mistaking the meaning in his voice.

Catching the pain in Keth's voice and knowing its meaning only too well, Dr. Riker looked sharply at him.

"Get to work on Gael," Keth said. "I'll be all right."

The desperate physician knew he had two patients. He also knew he could only help one at a time. He turned to Gael. She was sitting up, staring from frightened, uncomprehending eyes at the room around her and at the people in it. Again and again her gaze came back to Keth Ard. Doubt and confusion were in her.

"That's Cethn," she said, staring at Keth. But she wasn't sure about this. There were similarities but there were also differences. Thinking Keth was Cethn, she sounded happy.

Too happy. Her voice was that of a small child.

As he heard the small-child sound in her voice, Dr. Riker set his lips. He knew what this meant. She was not living in the yesterday of long ago but was living in the yesterday of her own childhood, when everything had

seemed simple and the world had seemed big and fine and wonderful—and full of love—and hate and fear and horror had not as yet come into her life. Her childhood had been happy. It had been sheltered and secure.

It was finished, ended, done. She was not a child. If her mind was fixated at this age level, she would remain a child forever, living in the unreal world of childhood.

"My dear—" Dr. Riker began.

She looked at him. Her eyes were blank.

"Who are you?" she said. "I don't know you."

Her gaze shifted.

"There's Cethn. I want to go play with Cethn."

The child note was even stronger in her voice. She started to get up from the couch. Her attitude was that of a child ready to run to meet a beloved playmate.

"Please, my dear, don't try to rise," Dr. Riker said quickly.

"Why not?" she demanded. This was an adult talking to her. The ways of adults were often nonsensical to a child.

"You are—ah—not well."

"Not well? I feel wonderful," she answered.

Again she started to get to her feet. Catching her arm, Dr. Riker restrained her gently. When she sat back down, her manner was that of an irritated child who has been restrained from running out to play.

Sitting on the floor, Keth Ard held the gun in both hands and tried to ignore the pain in his heart. It had spread up his throat. He watched Kuthu and Cal and the two women. The police ought to have them. He shifted his position so he was nearer the wall. If he could get to his feet and go into Gael's room and use the phone to call the police.

"Remember you are Gael Dana. You are a big woman now. You are grown up," Dr. Riker's voice came.

"Who is Gael Dana?" Gael answered. "I—I don't believe I know her. Is she someone I play with?"

"She's a friend," Dr. Riker said. Infinite patience, infinite tenderness, were in his voice.

Her deep heart heard the tenderness in his voice. She smiled at him. Watching this smile, he dared hope. It was no longer quite the smile of a child. It was becoming the mature smile of an adult woman.

"You will like Gael Dana real well," the physician said.

Gael's forehead fretted as she tried to think.

"Somehow I think Gael is me," she said.

Dr. Riker dared to breathe.

Keth Ard moved along the wall to the door leading into Gael's room. The phone was on the floor just inside the door. He reached one arm into the room and picked it up. Cuddling it against his ear, he listened. When no dial tone came, he frowned.

"The phone don't work," Kuthu said softly.

"Why not?" Keth said.

"Because I had it disconnected," Kuthu answered.

Keth rested the gun on his knees and tried to think. The pain in his chest was diminishing. His arteries and veins had taken the enormous excess of load without bursting. His breathing was becoming easier. The pain in his leg was completely gone and the burned feeling in his back was diminishing. It was not all gone, a sudden movement would set it off again. Now he remembered its source. His back had actually been burned. The pain there came from this. In part, it had come from some far older source. This older source he kept out of his mind.

He tried to think what he was going to do next. Time was needed to allow Dr. Riker to work on Gael. Keth knew he would like some of the expert work of the physician done on himself, if time and opportunity offered.

There was no time. There was the threat of Kuthu's existence, the threat of Cal, of the two women. If they ever caught him off guard for an instant, they would all jump at him.

He thought vaguely of gunning them, then put the thought out of his mind. He would shoot them if he had to, but he hoped he would not have to. He did not want their blood on his hands unless they forced him to it. In his mind somewhere was the suspicion that such debts would have to be paid, somewhere, sometime.

Somewhere in the long-gone time, a man had taught him not to kill. He could not remember this man's name but a blue color crossed his mind when he thought of this long-lost teacher.

"I remember who I am now," Gael's voice came. "I am Gael Dana. For a moment, I seemed to be a very small child."

Security came in her voice and an adult warmth that had overtones of great depth in it. She looked at the physician.

"Now I remember you! You're the doctor that Keth took me to after we had been burned! And Keth—"

Her eyes went across the room to Keth Ard sitting with his knees hunched up before him, with both hands on his knees and the gun held on Kuthu.

"What's wrong with Keth? What is he doing with that gun?"

Anxiety appeared in her voice but it was the anxiety of present time, the concern of the adult over the situation of a friend. The child tones had vanished from her voice.

"Don't worry about me, darling," Keth spoke. "I'm all right. Don't worry about the gun, either. I'm not going to use it unless I have to."

"He called me *darling*!" Gael said, to Dr. Riker.

"He loves you very deeply," the physician said gently.

"He does?" She brightened instantly. A sparkle appeared in her eyes. Love was the one thing that kept a woman in the present, that made her

live, that brought life into all of her being. All of which Dr. Riker knew perfectly well and which he was willing to encourage in every possible way.

"I most certainly do," Keth spoke. His voice was firm and sure and full of meaning. It carried conviction with it.

On Gael's face, the horror of yesterday vanished. The flight from yesterday was done. She was suddenly an adult woman, and a happy one.

Dr. Riker dared to wipe the sweat from his gnome-like face. Most of his job was done! All that remained was to stabilize Gael in this adult emotional tone. Time might be needed to make this emotional stabilization secure, perhaps months, but with love working on his side, the physician knew that this was a job he could do.

"I have two men in a tan truck outside," Kuthu spoke. "In the back end of that truck is the *thegnar*—"

Keth Ard heard the words with sudden horror. With the gun ready, he got quickly to his feet. His sudden movement brought a quick giddiness. He fought off the dizziness and walked to the back window. With the gun ready, he glanced out the back.

The back end of the tan truck was visible in the alley. One of the two back doors was open. No one was visible in the truck but he did not doubt that either Slim or Zandu was there, ready and waiting.

"You won't walk out of here alive, if I say the word," Kuthu spoke.

Keth turned to face the hawk-nosed man.

"I don't think you will say the word," Keth said. "I don't believe the *thegnar* beam will burn us and leave you alive."

Kuthu nodded in agreement.

"I know that," he said. He looked thoughtfully at Keth. "Then it's stalemate."

The hawk-nosed man was quite calm. "You can destroy me and I can destroy you. If you destroy me, you also destroy yourself in the process."

In the silent room, Keth could hear the distant honk of a car moving in

the early dawn.

So much of the night had passed! It seemed to him that many nights had passed, perhaps too many to count, since he had laid down on the floor and had placed a small piece of green stone on his forehead and had been taken back into a haunted yesterday. He had the impression that during this time he had lived parts of many lives.

"All I want is the Arthen Stone," Kuthu said. "Give it to me and I will go away. My word of honor—"

"*Your* word!" Keth said.

Hot anger glistened in the eyes of the hawk-nosed man.

"My word is good," Kuthu said.

"Your word is good as long as my gun is pointed at you," Keth answered. "Your word is good until it gets you out of a tight situation. After that, it is worthless!"

Dr. Riker tried to speak, but Keth motioned him to silence.

"If we let you walk out of here with the Arthen Stone, as soon as you could signal the men in the tan truck, this whole apartment building would go the way Dr. Riker's office building went. If a hundred people died in their sleep, this would make no difference to you! We would be dead. No one would ever be able to explain the explosion that had ripped an apartment house and had killed the people in it. No clues would point to you."

Hostility and bitter rage looked out of Kuthu's eyes.

"I think he will keep his word," Dr. Riker spoke. "I really do. He means what he says."

"How long will he mean it?" Keth demanded.

"That is impossible to say," the physician answered. "It may be he will break his word and destroy us all. But I see no other solution except to take this risk. After all—" He nodded toward Gael.

She was sitting stiff and erect on the couch.

"I need time to stabilize her," the physician said bluntly. "This is what I'm fighting for."

He looked at Keth.

"And if I may say so, you need some help too."

"I know," Keth said, chokingly.

"Gael's life, her sanity, are still at stake," the physician continued. "So, perhaps, *is* your sanity, Keth. There comes a point of no return, or of doubtful return—"

The room was silent.

"We can't gamble on the lives and the sanity of human beings," the physician said. He looked at Kuthu.

"Will you keep your word, sir?" The words were a question. They were also a prayer.

"Of course," Kuthu said instantly.

"Then I will give you the Arthen Stone," Dr. Riker said. He moved to the couch where Gael was sitting and reached under it. From behind the middle leg he produced a small piece of green stone.

Kuthu stared at it from fascinated eyes'.

While Keth Ard held his breath, the physician walked to the hawk-nosed man and dropped the stone into his open hand.

As his fingers closed over it, Kuthu got quickly to his feet. The expression on his face was one of complete triumph. He had what he wanted! His eyes, the set of his mouth, said that he had no intention of keeping his word. What to him was the life or the sanity of a woman? As soon as he was out of the building, Slim and Zandu, in the tan truck, would be told to go to work.

Realizing Kuthu's intentions, Keth Ard raised the gun, intending to shoot. Out of the corner of his eyes, he saw Gael on the couch. To shoot would be to risk putting her into shock that would risk her sanity. Her stabilization at the emotional level of an adult woman was very thinly held

as yet. She was more precious than life to him. He did not want her hurt. As desperate as the gamble was, he knew he was going to let Kuthu walk out of the apartment. Perhaps they could escape before Slim went into action as they had escaped from Dr. Riker's office building!

He dropped the muzzle of the gun.

The fat man took one quick step forward. His fist landed against Keth's jaw.

Stars exploded in Keth's head. Dropping the gun, he fell unconscious to the floor.

XIV

Keth Ard came quickly back to consciousness. A physical blow that knocked him out was far less punishing than the deep type of unconsciousness he had known when he had penetrated into the roots of his haunted yesterday. A physical blow would be taken by his tough body without too much complaint. The stress of the deeper unconsciousness that had come from exploring a haunted yesterday had been much, heavier, much harder to bear, and had put a greater strain on deeper levels of the psyche.

He was aware of Kuthu's voice rising in triumph.

"Good work, Cal. Now we've got the stone and the only people alive who know about it. We'll take all of them with us."

"He's out," Cal said, referring to Keth.

"Then we'll carry him. If anybody questions us, we'll say he is a drunken friend who has passed out. You two women get busy and wipe off everything we have touched in this place. We don't want to leave any fingerprints behind us."

Feet scurried on the rugs.

"But you promised—" Dr. Riker's voice rose in protest.

"And I'm going to keep my promise," Kuthu answered. "Like this!"

His fist lashed out to the jaw of the physician. Dr. Riker stumbled backward and fell against the wall, sliding down in a sitting position. The expression on his face showed two kinds of pain, the physical kind that came from the blow, and the mental-emotional pain that came from the knowledge he had been betrayed, that he had gambled and had lost. More important to him than either pain was the possibility that he had lost the important battle for the sanity of Gael Dana and Keth Ard.

On the couch, Gael was looking from frantic eyes at the scene around her.

Keth tried to get to his feet.

Cal kicked him in the face.

"We're getting out of here," Kuthu repeated. "Have you got your gun back, Cal?"

"Yes. And his too. And the ones the women had."

"Good. You carry him. I'll carry Doc. You two women carry the woman. If she struggles, strangle her. And remember, if anybody asks us any questions, we're just helping some drunk friends get home."

This idea seemed to amuse Kuthu. He laughed at it. Holding the Arthen Stone in his hand, he studied it.

Snap!

To Keth Ard, dazed on the floor, the sound seemed to come from some vast distance and to move from there to here with incredible speed, crossing an enormous gulf in split seconds. Vaguely and dimly, in his shaken state of mind, he remembered hearing this sharp *snap* and this sound of the tearing of very fine silk, this something that moved with incredible speed before. He tried to remember where and when he had heard this sound and what it had meant when he had heard it and what it might mean now. His mind was too shaken to give him accurate memories.

All sound suddenly went out of the room. Kuthu's booming voice was

suddenly still. Cal stopped speaking. The scurrying feet of the two women stopped.

There was one sound in the room—Gael's voice suddenly crying out.

But not with terror, not with horror, not with pain, and not in the tones of a child.

With happiness!

Keth managed to get his eyes open.

Defying the law of gravity, Blue Toga hung in the air of the room.

Behind Blue Toga, dimly seen, there seemed to be other blue-robed figures. Keth did not understand why the others should be there, he did not know where they had come from or their purpose in being here.

Or if they had any purpose.

Blue Toga held Keth's eyes.

The priest had something in his hands. Keth stared at it then recognized it as a long staff with a hook at the end, the kind of staff that shepherds used in long-gone centuries when they watched their flocks by night on hills and mountains around half the world.

Blue Toga held the staff up so Kuthu could not fail to see it. The hawk-nosed man stepped back from it. He looked at Cal and whispered huskily:

"Shoot!"

Cal pulled the trigger of the gun. The weapon spat lead and hate at the blue figure hanging in the air. The bullet buried itself in the opposite wall.

Blue Toga looked at Cal. Just looked. Obviously the bullet had not harmed this non-physical figure hanging in the air. The look shook Cal. Sweat suddenly popping out all over his face, the fat man dropped the gun.

Cal looked as if he was seeing a ghost from yesterday. The sight was shaking him to the bottom of his soul.

In a sitting position against the wall, unable to move, Dr. Riker was staring in rapt fascination at the blue clad apparition that had appeared again.

Blue Toga's lips moved. But no sound came through. Again he held up the staff, now as if he was using it as a signal.

It was Gael who seemed to know what Blue Toga was trying to say.

"He is asking you if you recognize the staff he is holding toward you," she said to Kuthu.

"I—" Kuthu whispered. His voice was a cross between a croak and a grunt. He sounded as if his throat was suddenly filled with coarse gravel.

"He says to tell you it is the crook that shepherds use. When good sheep stray into trouble, the shepherd uses this crook to pull them to safety," Gael said.

Her voice shifted and changed and came again.

"But if the sheep persist in straying, then the shepherd uses the crook—" Her voice caught and went into silence as she grasped the meaning of what she was about to say.

"—to strangle them!" she finished.

She looked wildly around the room. "I don't know if *strangle* is quite the right word for what is in Di-ur's mind. He would never strangle anyone. Perhaps what he means is that if the sheep persists in pulling against the gentle tug of the hook, then the sheep strangles itself!"

"Di-ur?" Keth Ard whispered.

She pointed to the blue clad figure. "That is Di-ur. Don't you remember him, Cethn? He was our best friend—yesterday."

"I—I remember very dimly," Keth answered.

Kuthu stared at the figure of the man in the blue toga. His face revealed that he recognized this man, also that now just the sight of this man in blue aroused consternation in him.

Blue Toga's lips moved again. Again Gael translated.

"You now have the Arthen Stone physically in your possession, Kuthu," she said.

The hawk-nosed man nodded.

Blue Toga smiled. He gestured toward those behind him.

" 'We have waited for this moment, Kuthu,' he says," Gael said.

"What does he mean?" Kuthu whispered.

Blue Toga looked at Gael and spoke directly to her. "He says that at this moment, when you again touched the Arthen Stone, you have put yourself in his power," she said.

The face of the hawk-nosed man was taut with fear.

"When we used it, it sent us back into yesterday," Gael said.
"Perhaps—" She did not say what she thought it might do to Kuthu.

"But I don't understand—" Kuthu said.

Again Blue Toga spoke.

"He says that you and he have a date with death in a dawn of long ago," Gael said. "I don't know for sure what he means. He is saying something about an earthquake. I think he means that you died, or are to die, in that earthquake."

"But that is ridiculous! I have escaped from that!" Kuthu said.

"He says you haven't escaped yet," Gael said. "He says you still have a date with death in the dawn."

"I—" Kuthu choked.

She seemed to listen.

"I can hear the rumble of the beginning quake," Gael whispered. "I can see the desert moving like the waves of a sea..."

Keth Ard could not hear the rumble of the quake. What he did hear was the normal, every-day sound of a car honking impatiently in the dawn for a garage to open and replace its atom-power pack. This belonged to the present, not the past.

Keth saw Kuthu's fingers start to open. He knew the hawk-nosed man was trying to drop the Arthen Stone. Keth called out sharply to Gael who seemed to communicate wordlessly with Blue Toga.

The crook in Blue Toga's hand leaped out. It seemed to grow longer and longer as it was extended, suddenly becoming infinitely long as it reached across time and space, or perhaps across both. But even if it was infinitely long, it caught the neck of Kuthu in its grip.

Blue Toga pulled. Like a shepherd pulling an erring sheep, he yanked on the staff.

On the floor, Keth Ard stared from bewildered eyes at what he saw happen. What he saw was Kuthu separate into two people. One of these two people, a hawk-nosed man with an arrogant face, was snatched by the shepherd's hook across the vast gulf of space-time.

The other Kuthu looked around from frantic eyes—and collapsed on the floor of the apartment, gibbering, wailing, weeping.

Now Keth was aware that the others in blue robes crowding behind Blue Toga were suddenly busy. They carried crooked staffs too, with which they reached out across this vast gulf, moving unerringly toward their targets. He saw one crook catch the neck of Cal, the fat man, he heard Cal scream, he saw the fat man become two men, he saw one of these men snatched across the gulf while the other here in Gael's apartment ran in circles, then collapsed bawling on the floor. He saw other crooks reach for the necks of the two women, he saw them shift and split in two, he heard their sudden screams.

In the space behind Blue Toga was a flurry of movement, a shifting and a changing, a flow and a distortion that seemed to go in directions that hurt the eye that tried to follow it. He saw the hawk-nosed man struggling futilely in that far-off space, he saw the two women suddenly meek and submissive, he saw the fat man with his face twisted to the back of his body as he tried to escape, tried and failed.

Other men behind Blue Toga were also busy, with crooked staffs that seemed to become infinitely long as they reached out for something.

The flurry of movement ceased. The men behind Blue Toga went away, went in a direction the eye could not follow, taking prisoners with them. They seemed to have more than four prisoners, but Keth had little time to be certain of numbers.

Blue Toga hung in the air of the room. He pointed to Gael. His lips moved. She got promptly to her feet and moved across the room. From the floor she picked up the small piece of green stone, which she held tenderly in her hands.

As a father smiles at his beloved daughter, Blue Toga smiled at her. He spoke again. She listened, then turned to Keth who was now on his feet.

"He says I am to keep the Arthen Stone and that I am to give it to my first-born child... He called me G'jhil..." A frown and a glow were mixed on her face, the frown because she could not quite remember who G'jhil was, or had been, or would be—and the glow for another reason.

"He says I am to give it to my first-born. This means I am going to marry and have babies!"

The glow on her face grew stronger.

Blue Toga smiled at her, and spoke again.

"He also says that now, as before, it will again bring good luck to me... and to mine."

The glow made her face beautiful.

Dr. Riker got slowly to his feet. He moved toward Blue Toga. The man from yesterday turned to him.

What followed then was one of the strangest sights Keth Ard had ever seen. The two tried to shake hands. The hands they tried to shake passed through each other and touched nothing. This did not seem to give either much concern. They went through the gesture of shaking hands anyhow. Now that Keth saw them together, they seemed to be very much alike. They were not the same and yet they were as alike as twin brothers,

perhaps with the similarity that comes to two different people who share common hopes and common dreams of a better day for many men across the vast gulf of many yesterdays. In these common goals, in their common purposes, in the longing of the deep heart of the priest from long ago and in the heart of the physician of 1980, was a common impulse, a love of men and a sincere desire to help men even though this meant sticking their heads out of their mud-turtle shells and taking great risks in learning what the world was like beyond the boundaries of their individual minds.

Dr. Riker's face had lost its pain. Though still haggard and twisted, it was again the face of an elderly benevolent; gnome who had helped somehow to weave the pattern of destiny for good ends and who is pleased and happy about this.

Then there was a shout outside the back window, a shout which sent Keth Ard scrambling for the pistol Cal had dropped, sent him running to the back window, looking for a tan truck parked in an alley, hoping for a shot at Slim and at Zandu before the *thegnar* beam went into action and blasted the building to ruin around them.

He saw the skinny man and the dwarf. They were not in the truck. Instead they were running along the alley, running as do men who are in flight from yesterday. Keth lowered the gun. Now he realized why there had seemed to be more than four prisoners. The crooks of some of the men behind Blue Toga had stretched out to this alley behind the building, taking prisoners there, prisoners who would return with their master to keep a date with death in a long-gone dawn.

He turned back to the room and at the sight of Kuthu on the floor, he lifted the gun again. Dr. Riker and Blue Toga stopped his action.

"This is not Kuthu," Dr. Riker hastily said. "Kuthu, the obsessing one, is gone, had been taken away. What we have here is J. Eller. Don't shoot him. He could not help what he was doing."

Sitting on the floor, J. Eller stared from vacant eyes at the room around him. "I'm only a poor curio shop owner," he said, over and over again. "I'm scratching out a living as best I can. Maybe I do peddle a little pornography out the back door now and then, but I haven't done anything bad... not really bad..."

Cal, the fat man, was sobbing on the floor. Great tears were rolling

down his cheeks. "How did I ever get into this mess? I was only a bouncer in a saloon. Now and then I threw a drunk out of the place but this was all..."

Keth's wondering eyes went to the two women.

Jarla of the green eyes was sobbing too. "I was only a waitress in an all-night cocktail joint... What if I did turn a trick or two as a prostitute now and then? What if I did? Do you know how hard it is for a girl to make an honest living?"

Shirla of the black eyes was crying.

Dr. Riker stared somberly at them. Blue Toga spoke again. Gael listened and translated.

"He says you are to patch them up, to put them together mentally and emotionally again." Gael said.

The elderly gnome looked a little sad at this prospect of additional hard work. And him with no office!

"Di-ur says he will work with you and will help you," Gael said, interpreting again.

Dr. Riker brightened. A ghost out of yesterday was offering to help a psychiatrist of 1980! The thought was shocking at first. What would his colleagues say? Then he brightened still more. To hell with what they thought! In a profession as complex as his was, the help of a ghost would be welcome. Especially such a ghost as this Di-ur! He smiled at the man in the blue toga.

Blue Toga smiled in reply. He blew a kiss to Gael. At Keth, he beamed as fondly as does a man looking at a favorite son. To Dr. Riker, he bowed, professionally, as one man of good will to another man of good will meeting across vast centuries.

Snap!

Blue Toga was gone.

The only sound in the room was that of the weeping of Cal and of the

two women and the muttering of J. Eller, saying over and over again that he was only a curio shop owner who had never done anybody any harm.

Gael was standing very close to Keth.

"I think we escaped from the earthquake alive," she said. "I think we went across the desert, then possibly across the sea, and raised a family. I think this has passed down through our family for many generations..."

She opened her hand to disclose a small piece of green stone that vibrated with a strange warmth.

She smiled at Keth. Both were aware that across the gulf of centuries the web of destiny had woven a strange fate for them, to meet, to part, to meet again in some other time and in some other place, to part, to meet again. To them in this moment, it seemed that each meeting brought additional warmth and love.

During the weeks that passed after this night, Dr. Riker put them all back together emotionally and mentally. J. Eller went back to his curio shop. Shirla and Jar la returned to their work as waitresses. Cal went back to his old job. But none of them were ever quite the same. They had touched yesterday, they had caught a glimpse of the vast gulfs of time and space, and of the vast and subtle weaving of the pattern of destiny. This touch would soften and cleanse them, would add depth to their lives, giving them at least a little of love where there had been only fear and hate.

Slim and Zandu vanished. Presumably somewhere they tried to pick up the threads of their lives again.

The machine in the back end of the tan truck went to the experts in the Defense Department, who had taken it apart and put it together again many, many times, trying to understand how it works, and if it once worked, why they can't make it work again. The fact that it did work, once, is clear enough to them, the evidence being a pile of rubble of what had once been an office building owned and occupied by a respected physician. Without that pile of rubble, the experts would have been able to forget the whole thing. The pile of rubble haunts them not only in the past, but also in the tomorrows that are to come. They are learning to hate the damned thing!

Keth Ard and Gael Dana found in each other adequate rewards.

Dr. Joseph Riker, who had once complained because he just couldn't remain a mud turtle, has a strange consultant whom nobody else ever sees. For some time, his curiosity aroused by Kuthu's question as to who he was, Dr. Riker toyed with the idea that in the old time he had been Di-ur, a hypothesis he had been forced to drop with reluctance. No, he had not been Di-ur. But perhaps he and Di-ur had once belonged to the same brotherhood. They had once shared, and shared still, a common goal and a common purpose of helping men.

With this knowledge, Dr. Riker is content.