

# **SNAKE ATTACK!**

THE GREATEST Kidnap Caper of All Time!

10,000 Terrans kidnapped!

Is Akon behind it?

This is a challenge for Division 3 and once again (see #102) the agents of the Secret Organisation are called into action, action calling for the greatest diplomacy, a mantle of invisibility and a devil-may-care approach to danger.

For, make no mistake about it, danger abides on every side on the planet Passa, scene of mysterious happenings.

A strange plan is required when the intrepid Terrans meet—

## **THE IDOL FROM PASSA**

### **1/ THE SKIN GAME ISN'T A JOKE**

*Ayaa-Oooy, thou art the Glorious One, praised be Thy Name! We bow to the will of Ayaa-Oooy the Magnificent...*

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For Andy Lever the greatest adventure of his life had become a reality. He had finally left the Earth and now he was on a far distant planet. He was actually living on a world that was unutterably alien.

As he looked about him in the jungle clearing he realized that the strange hour of twilight had come. The land lay in multicoloured shadows and was silent except for the small mysterious sounds he was fond of listening to because they helped to accentuate his awareness of adventure. This time of evening was the period between red sunset and blue dawn—a 1-hour span during which the red sun went down in the West and the blue sun came up in the East. The heavens seemed to shimmer in overtones of reddish brown and violet hues, reflecting weirdly in the glass forest around him as in some psychedelic kaleidoscope.

He was vague distracted by the unexplained presence of a single tree in the clearing where not a tree had been standing several hours ago. But now there it was, more than 15 feet tall and with a trunk that appeared to taper to narrower proportions as it neared the ground.

Then it passed from his mind for the moment and he thought of other things. In the alien twilight the small house appeared to have changed into a tremendous dark shape that pressed itself against the warm earth and seemed ready to spring upon its prey. Andy often marvelled at the strange impressions he received from this dwelling, which was *his* house and should have filled him with a sense of peace and security. At this peculiar time of evening it filled him with a presentiment that was less definable. But then he would tell himself, as he did now, that after all the house could only reflect his own temperament, which was characterized by a restless zeal for action. No, the house was alright—it was he himself who responded to the changing moods of his weird environment.

A small bright spark of light flashed against the brown-violet sky. Andy watched it go as it sped heavenward and increased in brilliance. It finally dwindled away until it blinked out like an extinguished star. Then belatedly the far thunder of a starting spaceship rolled across the land. Andy took a deep breath, sensing the heavy scent of the jungle, while he thought of the city of Modessa where the great spaceport was located. He was satisfied with the place where he was, 1,500 km removed from Modessa. Others called him a fool but he preferred to be a fool rather than live in one of the great cities where one did not get the feeling of being on an alien world.

All of which brought his thoughts back to the happenings of the day—or rather, to what had failed to happen. The Evergreens, as the natives were called, had not appeared; they had not delivered their usual quota of skins. Only 8 of them had come to the shedding centre where ordinarily 10 times that number showed up each day. Not that it made any difference to Andy. The Passa Skin Co. paid him a fixed salary for his half-day work. He was paid whether the Evergreens supplied any skins or not. So he wasn't bothered about it personally—he merely wondered about it.

Finally his attention turned again to the tree which hadn't been there two hours ago. He walked over closer to it but in the gathering darkness he couldn't see it too clearly. He refrained from touching it, however, because he knew what had happened to inexperienced people who had grabbed hold of things without knowing for sure that they were not dangerous. Actually he didn't doubt that on Passa it was possible for a thick, branchless tree to grow to a height of 15 feet within a time-span of 2 hours. Stranger things than that had happened here. But he still wanted to know what this was all about.

He turned around to get a lamp from the house. And that was the moment when the tree began to move. It simply bent over toward him. Andy heard a sound above him and whirled about swiftly but it was of no use. The thing he had assumed to be a tree swatted him, knocking him down, and then it pressed him against the ground.

For half a second Andy was paralysed with fear. Then he began to struggle wildly against the weight of the thing but the smooth surface of the 'tree' offered him no place to get a grip on it. He slipped down under it and the tree redoubled its pressure on him as though his resistance had goaded it into further aggression.

Andy couldn't breathe anymore. A fiery barrage of small, painful prodding drummed against his ribs and there was a wild roaring in his ears. He suddenly realized that he'd never be able to free himself from this murderous pressure. And all at once he knew what it was that was lying on top of him and that nothing could withstand such a massive force.

He began to cry out but there was no one there to hear him. As he began to lose consciousness, oblivion seemed to rush upon him in blinding streaks of lightning and crackling fireworks.

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Nike Quinto stared suddenly as though he had been struck dumb. He stood there as if he were having a stroke and probably he would have been the first to assert that the shock was too much for his heart.

Which wouldn't have been far from the truth. Col. Quinto was a chubby little man with a slightly bloated-looking and perpetually flushed face which always exhibited a few drops of perspiration even in the coolest part of the year. Above his puffy lips was a small nose under a pair of deep-set eyes topped by a narrow space of forehead that was sparsely obscured by a scraggle of colourless blond hair. The colonel had never been one to inspire anyone's congenial response at first sight. To those who did not know him he was strictly anti-simpatico.

Ron Landry and Larry Randall waited until the security door behind them had closed. Then they saluted with a military preciseness that was a strange contrast to their summery and very casual civilian attire.

When he spoke, Nike Quinto seemed to fairly wheeze and shriek in an unpleasantly high tone of voice. "Ye gods! I told them to send me two of the best men we had and look what they come up with! I ask you—is the whole world trying to make sure I'll have a heart attack? What am I supposed to do with the likes of *you*?! Oh well, you're here now, so sit down. Have you listened to the tapes yet? Glord, do you think we have all day? Say something: yes or no?"

"Yes," Ron Landry answered calmly.

"Yes what!"

"Yessir—we have listened to the tapes."

"Aha! And so?"

Ron Landry cleared his throat and stole a glance at Larry sitting next to him but the latter made no response. Nike Quinto was standing behind his desk as if ready to pounce upon his answer.

"We can't be sure, sir," Ron began cautiously, "but it looks as if somebody were playing a bad joke."

For a moment it appeared as though Nike Quinto were going to hit the ceiling. At least he looked up at it as he bent back his head and ran his hands through his hair. He sighed almost piteously as if the last hope of the world had fled from him.

But finally he vented his spleen: "Jokes, he says! Somebody playing a bad joke—on *me*? Landry, you're a nail in my coffin! It seems you can't say a word without sending my blood-pressure up another 10 centimetres!" He removed his hands from his head and glared. "Do you really think that anyone would *dare* to play jokes on me?"

Ron Landry was thinking that he knew of at least two people who would like to try but of course

whether or not they might succeed was another question. So he answered: "Sir, please keep in mind the purpose of this division. This organization has been created for a specific area of assignments. Forgive my stupidity... but I can't for the life of me figure out what two special agents have to do with a jungle planet where the natives have merely started to turn in 4 or 5 skins a day instead of a normal quota of 80. I—"

"They've ceased delivering entirely," snapped Quinto. "That's the latest report."

Ron Landry waved his hand in a deprecating gesture. "So great! They've stopped supplying skins. What are the skins for? Perfume? Aromatic hides and leathers? Can you build a spaceship with them? Can they be used to power an energy cannon? No. Are they a source of exotic drugs or medicines? No. So riddle me this: why should we concern ourselves over such fid-fad?"

Nike Quinto sat down with emphasis. His twisted grin was a mixture of anger and malice. "I can't take this standing up or it'll be the end of me! It's too much for my circulation. For the sake of survival I'll have to contain myself in spite of you, Landry. For you I suppose the world depends on spaceships, cannons and miracle drugs, right? You don't seem to be concerned with the fact that Terra is engaged in a bitter economic struggle with the Springers, who think Divine Providence created commerce just for them. It makes no difference to you that mysterious things are happening on a world that's supposed to be Terra's exclusive trade territory—that revenues there have suddenly dropped to zero. And just what is that revenue? Pretty smelling hides? Spaceships? No. Cannons? No. Nor any drugs either. Of course we're not concerned that Terrans have settled there—or are we? What? 14 million of them? Gee whiz now, we hadn't thought of that! What? And 10,000 of them have either been killed or have vanished in the glass forests under mysterious circumstances? Oh well, why bother? You can't make anything out of dead settlers either, can you? No spaceships, no cannons..."

Landry had straightened up in his chair. "We knew nothing about that, sir!" he blurted out. "That was not on the tapes!"

Quinto waved him to silence. "Exactly. That's why I've called you here. Now I want you to go into the next room and listen to what you are told there. You will take careful note of everything and then tomorrow morning early at 7:48 Terrania time you will take passage on the scheduled passenger freighter of the Passa Line—is that clear?"

Ron and Larry got up. They didn't see Quinto touch a control button on his desk but the door to the next room was already standing open when they turned toward it. When they entered they saw a room dimly illuminated by a reddish light. They also saw a row of comfortable upholstered chairs and the familiar large screens of the hypno-projectors.

"By the way," Quinto called after them, "do you have any idea of what the annual revenue from Passa has been so far?"

Ron stopped and turned to look back at him. "No sir," he answered.

"Oh you don't, eh—well then I'll tell you: 15 billion Solars. That, my friend, is enough to build 10 heavy cruisers for the Fleet!"

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Passa was a world in the double-star system of Antares, the 9th planet as counted outward in the normal sequence from the centre. It was a warm oxygen world, somewhat larger than Earth yet with a lighter gravitation. The native intelligences on Passa were strictly non-humanoid and the first Terrans who saw them had experienced a shock of terror in spite of the weapons they carried. For the aborigines of Passa were nothing more nor less than 4-limbed serpents which measured on the average between 15 and 18 feet in length. They were not only different from Earthly serpents in the matter of intelligence but also in their method of locomotion, since they walked upright. That is, they didn't actually walk but managed instead to support themselves on their supple and powerful tails and to move forward in a kind of hopping fashion which was nevertheless somehow elegant—and very swift. Their limbs served merely as a means of grasping things and maintaining their balance. Their serpentine bodies ended at the top in a round worm-like head containing a number of orifices whose various functions only a galacto-biologist could make any sense out of. The Terran settlers had taken possession of this Paradise world with enthusiasm and they had named the serpent inhabitants Evergreens because of the prominent green colouration of their skins.

Not only were the Evergreens the native intelligences of Passa, they were also the suppliers of that trade commodity which had made the planet so economically important to the Earth: Passa Pelts, the Antares bonanza. This was owing to the fact that the Evergreens had one ancient biological function in common with other serpent types: they shed their skins periodically. The mechanism and frequency of this moulting process or shedding was something unheard of even among the experts. The fact remained, however, that the Evergreens were able to produce an astonishing quantity of skins.

These 'Passa pelts' exuded a marvellously pleasant aroma and could easily be processed for almost any type of application as hides or leatherwork. On Terra and Arkon, products made of Passa leather were in a higher price bracket than their equivalent weight in gold. The most exclusive women's salons counted Passa perfumes among their most exotic and expensive specialties.

The Springers, those restless nomadic offshoot of the Arkonides who roamed the galaxy in their clan-ships, lived only for trading and were convinced that commerce on an interstellar scale was their own exclusive prerogative. Of course it had not taken them long to get wind of the gold mine that the Terrans had discovered on Passa but when they attempted to muscle in on the business the Terra Fleet's Passa Task Force quickly showed them where the lines of demarcation were and they informed them that no Springer would be welcome on Passa unless by very special invitation.

After that, developments proceeded peacefully on the peltrich planet. Instruments were developed which could translate the vowel-saturated language of the Evergreens into English, and vice-versa. The Evergreens were then persuaded to gather at designated collection points when they shed their skins and by this means a daily average quota of the pelts was obtained. When they moulted, the Evergreens hung by their tails from the trees. By a process of shaking their bodies strenuously they would slip their old skins down over their heads. The Terrans made sure that there were enough suitable trees for the purpose at every collection point and they paid the Evergreens for their services in trade commodities which were considered by the serpents to be useful to them.

For a period of some years this operation had continued smoothly. The Terrans had expanded their settlements on Passa without crowding the Evergreens. In fact there was no problem in this regard because the serpent people lived in their glass forests, so-called. Such forests consisted of thickets of bamboo-like growths which were hard as glass and branchless, with transparent trunks reaching as high as 150 feet or more. On the other hand the settlers preferred the more pleasant regions of grass plains or the banks of the broad rivers and the more inhabitable coastal areas. They hardly had any contacts to speak of with the Evergreens, other than at the pelt collection points. Although their language could be

understood, the serpent people seemed to be a bit wary or skittish about revealing too much concerning their lives in the remoteness of the glass forests. So it was that the Terrans did not know much more about their ‘fellow lodgers’ on Passa, other than the fact that they shed their skins for them. The harmonious situation on Passa was based more on a separation of the social orders rather than on a loose system of integration.

Within very recent times, however, this harmony had been disturbed. No one knew how or why. The Evergreens failed to appear anymore at the collection points. The supply of pelts had been cut off almost abruptly. A few settlers living far from the cities had been found dead near their houses. A large number of other settlers were missing. Also almost all the men were now missing who had attempted to go into the glass forests to procure what was not being brought to the ‘market place’. The few who were able to return alive had not penetrated very deeply into the forest fastness. They had returned because they had not found anything or because they had taken insufficient provisions along or because it was too great an effort—or for all such various and sundry reasons.

It was to be assumed that the Springers had their hands in what was going on. Nobody else would have had a reason to offer opposition to the comparatively sparse human population of Passa. Even though Passa yielded an annual revenue of 15 billion Solars, certainly no enemy could hope to strike a deadly blow at the Solar Imperium by eliminating the business or even provide a major irritant through such an action. On the other hand it could be argued that even the Springers were not interested in getting at Terra in this manner—other than indirectly for the time being, since that would go hand in hand with their Ultimate goal. In their case it was much more a matter of simply wanting to rake in the profits for themselves.

However well grounded this suspicion was, it failed to solve the mystery. How would the Springers have managed to influence the serpent people? How could they even get to Passa past the patrol cordons of the Terra Fleet? It would be impossible for them to land on Passa with a whole fleet of their own. The most that might have slipped through the gaps in the Terra patrol line would have been one or two smaller spacecraft. How could such a small force manage to persuade the indigenous inhabitants of such a large world to become bitter enemies of people with whom they had cooperated so well up tin now?

This was the major question and a great many things depended upon finding an answer in time—perhaps even the very existence of the Passa colony itself.

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It was to this extent that Maj. Landry and Capt. Randall were informed on the morning of 7 October 2102, when they boarded the passenger freighter *Laramie* which was bound for Passa. They did not travel incognito by any means. Everyone on Terra as well as many intelligences outside the Solar Imperium knew the operations of Intercosmic Social Welfare and Development. It would seem understandable that this institution should be sending a pair of observers to Passa for, in the terminology of the Colonial Ministry, Passa was by no means a fully developed colony. However, nobody realized that this same institution contained a certain Division 3, whose interests lay anywhere but in the realm of offering economic assistance to underdeveloped colonies. Nor did they know that Ron Landry and Larry Randall were commissioned officers in the Military.

In addition to being informed about their immediate mission, Landry and Randall had been educated

concerning everything on Passa since the founding of the colony there, and especially regarding what had been going on during the past few weeks and even days. This data could not be erased from their memories except under special conditions because it had all been impressed upon them by means of a blitz-course of hypno-training. The information had taken root in their subconscious minds.

## 2/ THE GLASS FOREST DISASTERS

*O thou wonderful Ayaa-Oooy, our talking drums pay homage to thy name, and we bring thee sacrifices. We bring thee offerings greater than have been seen since thou didst create the world...!*

\* \* \* \*

Froyd Coleman saw that trouble was headed his way. Perhaps not actually trouble, he corrected himself, but work at least. And wasn't that the same thing?

Coleman's office building was at the southeast side of the big spaceport. Whoever had paperwork or other technicalities to take care of before leaving the free port area and entering the sovereign tax territory of the Colony of Passa always had to deal with Froyd Coleman in one way or another. Froyd usually confined himself to merely hearing the case and then delegating one of his subordinates to handle the matter. In his opinion an inspector shouldn't have to concern himself in detail with all these things; it was enough to maintain an overall supervision of the operation.

Coleman was 46 years old. In the course of his officialdom he had become a bit heavier than one might have expected, considering his eventful background at least up to his 40th year. In spite of a tonsure-like bald spot fringed with red hair, he carried his head with great dignity. For many hours during the day his activity was restricted to standing in just such a dignified posture at the large window which looked out upon the landing field and the approach and exit ramps for the passenger taxis.

It was through this window that he saw the two men headed his way. It was not necessarily the figures of this pair that drew his attention but rather the way they walked, the manner in which they looked about them and the seriousness with which they spoke to one another. It was these things that convinced Froyd he would have to go to work.

He sighed and went to put on his uniform jacket. According to regulations every official of the Solar Imperium had to wear a uniform while on duty but this was one regulation that Froyd had succeeded in bypassing during about 99% of the time.

However, he knew with which visitors it might be more advisable to stick to the rules.

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"You having problems?"

The way the man put the question, thought Froyd, was like a shot from a pistol. These were the first words the big blond stranger had said after the initial greeting.

Froyd nodded with a sigh. "You might say that," he answered. "In fact more than we can handle."

"Which means?"

Froyd looked at his interrogator in some surprise. "It means that in the meantime we've lost 10,000 people—and in my opinion that's more than we can cope with."

"And what do you attribute these difficulties to?" asked the blond, whose name was Ron Landry.

"To the natives," was Froyd's instant answer.

Landry smiled. "Yes, of course. But what's the reason for their sudden strange behaviour?"

"That I don't know," he conceded. What were these two really after? he asked himself. Since when did the ISWD concern itself with such matters?

The blond suddenly changed the subject. "Mr. Coleman, I believe you're the highest State official in the city of Modessa, are you not?"

"Yes," he said frankly.

"You know, this isn't an inquisition," Landry explained with a smile. "All we'd like to know is what measures you've taken so far to handle the situation and protect the settlers."

Froyd frowned slightly. "You have a perfect right to ask me about such matters. Let's take care of the second question first. I've instructed all settlers outside the metropolitan areas to move into the city. Cities are safer. It's only out in the open country where people have disappeared. Of course Modessa isn't a tourist town and there are only two main hotels to speak of. With our lack of bed space we've been hard put to put them up in churches and bowling alleys, and emergency supplies from Earth have been slow in getting here. I hope the *Laramie* has brought more provisions. Naturally the settlers responded to our call since they could see what was happening out there. Modessa's normal population of 300,000 has increased to between 700 and 800 thousand. But the hinterlands have been cleared and now at least we don't have to worry about human lives anymore.

"As for your first question: yesterday I dispatched an expedition into the glass forests to track down the natives and try to straighten them out. If we don't teach the Evergreens a little respect they'll only continue to get out of line as they have been doing."

When he mentioned the punitive expedition the two strangers seemed to prick up their ears.

Landry had a quick question. "And have they achieved their objective?"



Froyd laughed bitterly. "No, of course not. They moved out in glider units. At 100 km per hour over open country it takes a while to get to the edge of the glass forest, which is 1500 km from here. So it would have taken them until last night to set up a camp there and this morning they were scheduled to start hacking their way in. That glass bamboo is so hard and tough that it takes even a few moments for a thermo-beamer to make the stuff pliable enough to get through I calculate that the troops can't make any faster headway on foot than maybe 3 km per hour... and of course the worm-heads aren't dumb enough to hide at the rim of the forest. They live deeper in the interior."

Landry nodded. Then he reached into his pocket so casually that Froyd didn't notice the movement. He was only alerted when he saw something glittering in Landry's hand. He blinked and looked closer at it. What he saw gave him something of a shock.

He thought he knew every type of service insignia in existence. He was familiar with all of them from the ordinary green badges of the regular police and the red insignia of the galactic criminal police force to the silver shields of the military security men. They were all more or less the same pattern—a small Earth ball with initials representing one or another of the service branches of the Solar Imperium. The colour of such medallions determined the level or magnitude of cooperation that the bearer could expect to receive from authorities in charge of any operation.

He had never really believed that the violet medallion existed—which purportedly outranked the silver badges by far—until now. The badge in Landry's hand was violet.

"You can believe what you're looking at, Coleman," said Landry in a businesslike tone of voice. As he replaced the badge in his pocket he added: "Of course you're at liberty to check it out if you wish—but first of all you'll have to call back that expedition! Those troops are to turn around as fast as they can and report back here to Modessa."

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Froyd pointed through the haze and smoke of the establishment. "There he is," he said.

Ron Landry thought that a 'new world' like the Passa Colony would be the last place anyone would expect to find a public tavern like this with an atmosphere in the older tradition and wearing a patina of several centuries of patronage. But without doubt this was just such a place.

Landry and Randall had had a second conversation with Froyd Coleman in the office of Maj. Bushnell of the Terra Fleet and there he had assured them that the man who knew the glass forest country best was Lofty Patterson and that he could most likely be found at Fiano's. So they had come here with Froyd to find him.

To Ron and Larry, at the moment, Lofty Patterson was a small, wizened figure who was semi-observed by the bustle and dim lighting of the tavern but they had been told that he was the best expert concerning the planet of Passa—in fact the last living representative of the first settler group that had landed here, 54 years ago.

Ron made an inviting motion with his hand. Froyd walked ahead into the hazy room while Ron and Larry remained near the door. They saw Froyd tap the old man on the shoulder and then converse with him

briefly. Lofty nodded several times and finally Froyd pointed toward the door. The oldster got up and accompanied him.

Ron opened the door for Lofty as they all went out. The old pioneer's face was lined with fine little wrinkles, reflecting an odd mixture of joviality and wariness. There was a cheerful glitter in his eyes, however, as he came along with them with his hands in the pockets of a suit that must have been almost as old as he was. Ron figured he was probably between 60 and 65. He must have been just a boy when he came to Passa.

They came to a stop at the curb where the car was parked that the city had placed at the disposal of Ron and Larry.

Lofty opened the conversation in a voice that matched his friendly face. "Froyd has vouched for you," he said. "That's enough for me. So what's up?"

"We wanted to talk about that, but somewhere else," Ron advised him kindly. "Didn't Froyd mention that?"

"Oh sure, but...?"

"In Maj. Bushnell's office. Would that make you feel better?"

"You're on!" answered Lofty agreeably.

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"Why didn't you go along with the expedition?" was Ron Landry's first question.

Maj. Bushnell's office was a fairly large room but less comfortable than it was purely functional. The Terra Fleet C.O. for the Passa Base was not present, himself. Ron Landry had explained to the major that the present situation did not fall within his own jurisdiction and Bushnell had been happy to make his office available for any discussions that might be necessary. For Ron and Larry this was especially important because the walls of the room were wired against tampering. Any attempt to bug the place would be detected in the security centre.

Once arrived, Lofty did not appear to be completely at ease in these surroundings. He narrowed his eyes and looked about him before he answered. "I didn't go because I knew they wouldn't come up with anything."

"Didn't you tell that to the men?"

"Sure I did but all they did was laugh. They always take everything I say as a big joke because they think I'm too old. All the same, you know, nothing's changed in those glass forests since I came here."

Ron was listening attentively. "Why do you believe that the expedition won't come up with anything?"

Lofty laughed derisively. "Very simple. Just jump in the ocean sometime and try to swim after a shark."

What will you come up with?"

"Not a thing, Lofty. That sounds convincing. What you're saying is that the glass forests are the natural habitat of the Evergreens. They can get around in it but our people can't. Good, that makes sense. At least I'll take your word for it—but then why did the others laugh at you?"

"Well, use the same example," suggested Lofty. "They thought the shark might attack them and that would be their chance."

"And you would say they are wrong about that?"

Lofty nodded emphatically. "Of course! The Evergreens only attack when the cards are stacked in their favour. I've never yet seen those Wormies stick their necks out for anything. They won't take a risk, no matter what. So when they see an expedition coming on too big and strong, all they do is let the troops run through the woods until they've had enough of it and go home again."

Ron thought this over for a while. Finally he asked: "Lofty, would you go with the two of us into the glass forests?"

Lofty stared into space for a moment before he answered. "You two seem to have your heads on straight. Yes, I'd go with you."

It was at this moment that Froyd Coleman sat up with a start. He raised his left arm and pointed to the small transceiver on his wrist. Ron nodded to him. He had heard the soft buzzing of its receiver.

Froyd raised it toward him and answered the call. The voice coming through was so weak and indistinct that Ron couldn't make out the message. However, he saw Froyd's lips compress suddenly as he frowned in alarm. Froyd had very few words to say. The most important part of the conversation was coming from the other end.

Finally he lowered his arm and looked at the three men one after another as he spoke. "The Evergreens seem to have stacked their cards right in a hurry," he said bitterly, referring to Lofty's expression.

"What does that mean?" asked Ron sharply.

"It means," said Froyd heavily, "that of the 120 troops we sent out there are just 15 of them left alive—and of course they are en route back to Modessa by the swiftest means possible!"

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The Evergreens had used an extremely simple method. They had managed to split up the expedition forces by luring them on in different directions with obvious signs of their passage. Each glider group ended up following a separate spoor until each 12-man crew was on its own recognizance.

As reported by three survivors of one of these sorties, the Evergreens had charged them at the moment when their glider landed and the men were getting out. They hadn't expected an ambush so they had not even had a chance to make effective use of their weapons. The Evergreens had swarmed upon them with

a force that must have numbered at least 200. They must have been waiting to charge from concealment because the pilot had not seen a sign of them as he had come down.

In the confusion of the bloody battle the three men who brought in the report had managed to get away in the thickets of the glass forest.

However, these three were not the only ones who had escaped the strategy of the Evergreens. One fully manned glider had been spared because its pilot had been too cautious to attempt a haphazard landing inside the forest. The three survivors from the other group had seen this glider several times from a distance and finally it came near enough so that they could attract its attention. The craft lowered to a point where the exhausted fugitives could be drawn up on a hoist line. Two of them fainted after being hauled on board, while the third one gave an account, as best he could, of the terrible fate of his unit.

The pilot of the one aircraft that had remained unscathed must have been an exceptionally alert type. He did not accept the frightening story as an excuse for leaving the forest area and returning as quickly as possible to the safety of the city. Although he knew that the slightest engine failure would make him and his men the prey of the Evergreens, he nevertheless searched the region further for signs of any of the other units. It had been some time since he had had any radio contact with them and prior to picking up the three survivors he had figured the other gliders had landed so that the crews could challenge the enemy on foot.

During a 5-hour search they spotted the wrecks of 9 gliders in the depths of the glass forest but no matter how hard the pilot and crew strained their eyes for a sight of survivors they saw no trace of them. The serpent people must have taken them all away with them, whether living or dead. For what purpose, no one could tell. But at least there was still hope of being able to rescue any of the Evergreens' human captives who still might remain alive. Only after determining this much had the last glider set course for home and a preliminary report of the expedition's failure had been transmitted ahead while they were underway.

Ron Landry's first step was to place a blackout on any news of the expedition's failure and it was here that he encountered Froyd Coleman's most stubborn resistance. Froyd knew many of the men who had taken part in the expedition and who had left their families behind them in the city. Froyd insisted that the immediate next of kin such as wives and children should not be kept dangling in a state of uncertainty. But Landry feared that news of the catastrophe would only whip up the settlers' anger all the more against the Evergreens and cause them to send out further expeditions—if necessary, without official sanction.

"That must be avoided, regardless of the circumstances," Ron concluded coldly. "They were able to take the loss of 10,000 men without a big commotion, so they can take the loss of another hundred without blowing a fuse. There can be no punitive expeditions against the Evergreens at this time. The only expedition that will concern itself at all with the situation is going to consist of three men: Larry, Lofty and myself!"

Froyd finally yielded. He declared himself ready to make all necessary preparations for the 3-man expedition.

But Ron assured him this wouldn't be necessary. He was brief and to the point. "There will be no preparations. We leave tomorrow at sunrise."

### 3/ THE SERPENT'S TALE

*We have fought a great battle in the glory of thy name, O thou Magnificent One! Great are the spoils which we bring to thee to win thy grace, Ayaa-Oooy, God of Splendour...!*

\* \* \* \*

"This is Andry Lever's house," said Lofty sadly. "The poor kid. He was one of the first ones they got to."

Larry had brought the glider down in front of the rambling, low-roofed dwelling. Ron was looking out through the cabin window.

"He was pretty far out here, wasn't he?" asked the latter. "Over there the forest begins."

"I often warned that youngster about it," muttered Lofty. "But he wouldn't listen. He liked it out here in the wilderness and he just didn't believe that anything could happen to him."

"You warned him?" asked Ron. "Why was that? Did you suspect that the Evergreens would become rebellious?"

Lofty looked at him as though in surprise. "Rebellious? No, not exactly. But the fact is—anybody living out here by himself is putting himself right in their hands—or claws, you might say. Those Wormies live here in the woods by the tens of thousands—maybe millions—and no one man is going to be able to do much against them, no matter how good his defences. Oh it's true enough that the Evergreens always seemed to be friendly and well behaved but the hooker is that we've never really learned how they actually think. We don't know if there's really any moral basis to their logic or if it's related at all to ours. We don't know if they think of us as friends or enemies or if they're completely indifferent to us. In fact we don't know anything at all about them—other than that they have nice-smelling skins and from time to time they shake them off for us. So isn't it a risky business to venture so close to them? That's why I warned Andy Lever. It was nothing more than that."

Ron nodded. "So you say he was dead when they found him?"

"That's right."

After that, Ron was silent for awhile. Lofty would have given much to know what he was thinking about but during the half day he had spent with these two men he had given up asking curious questions.

Larry Randall had been staring at the house in silence but now he suddenly spoke to Ron. "So it looks as if they've changed their tactics in only a matter of days," he commented.

"And pretty drastically, too. I'd like to know what they do with the dead victims that they carry away with them."

"But the main question is *why* they've changed their tactics."

Ron smiled suddenly. "Lofty isn't making any bets on our ever being able to figure out the logic of these native creatures. But why rack our brains over it when the answer may simply be that they think differently than we do? And if that isn't it we'll probably never find out, anyway."

Larry shrugged and offered no further comment.

"What happened to Andy's body?" Ron asked.

"Some neighbouring settlers buried him," Lofty answered. "His grave is behind the house."

"No autopsy?"

"What for? One of the worm-heads fell on him—or pounced on him, the way we figured it later. The snake's tracks were right there, big as life. And Andy's chest... well, let's not talk about it. But I mean there wasn't any doubt about his being dead." As he finished speaking he pushed a button on his armrest, which caused the side window to slide down.

Ron turned to him. "Maybe this will sound ridiculous, Lofty," he said, "but I don't want you to ever do that without warning me. Maybe it's safe where we are but inside the forest our lives could depend on whether the windows are open or shut. Do you understand?"

Lofty understood and seemed crestfallen. "Yeah, you're right," he answered almost meekly. "I should have thought of that, myself. Maybe I'd better—" He stopped suddenly and seemed to be trying to hear something. Then he leaned his head out the open window.

"What is it?" asked Ron in a low voice.

"One of them's out there!" exclaimed Lofty.

"One of what?"

"An Evergreen," Lofty whispered. "I can smell him. Over there!" He reached out an arm to point.

For the first time Ron gave his close attention to the glittering edge of the glass forest. The blue sun was now a brilliant white to the eye and stood close to the zenith. The air appeared to shimmer above the exotic thickets and alien plant forms. It was hot outside—and still as death. The forest sounds had faded away.

Some of the individual tree trunks were 6 feet in diameter. They were weird in appearance, sometimes allowing light to pass through and at other times reflecting the sun's rays. If one didn't look directly at it the forest presented the appearance of a giant pane of glass with thousands of cracks in it and having jagged edges. It was hard to judge distances in such a jungle. The multiple reflections made a bewildering pattern of light and semi-shadows. After gazing into the glassy maze for awhile, one's eyes ceased to distinguish objects with any reliable clarity.

The outside air was filled with many strange aromas, most of which were quite pleasant. Ron couldn't decide which scent came from the Evergreen that Lofty believed he had picked up. Back on Earth they had demonstrated to him the scent of a serpent hide from Passa but here there were too many other admixtures in the natural environment to be able to distinguish it.

Ron let his gaze wander along the edge of the forest while trying to discover where the Evergreen might be. But he saw nothing, neither a shadow nor any movement whatsoever. He began to think that Lofty might be mistaken yet the tension of the situation wouldn't leave him. He groped for the weapon that he carried on his belt.

Lofty remained motionless at the window. Larry acted as though he were not concerned with the matter. But his eyes were on the flight panel and the control stick was in his hand.

Minutes passed.

Suddenly Lofty drew back from the window. "It's coming now," he rasped out excitedly. "Look over there to the right of the house and you'll see it!"

He gave Ron his place at the open window and Ron stared in the indicated direction with a feverish excitement. He fastened his gaze on the glittering scintillation of the glass forest and tried to see the creature but the more he strained his eyes the more the scene became a blur. Everything turned into a swirl of colourful reflections in which no details at all were discernible.

Ron closed his eyelids for a second in order to clear his vision but right away he was sorry he had done so. When he opened his eyes again, the Evergreen was already standing in front of the glass forest, fully erect and with its four arms outstretched as though for balance. As Ron stared at it he felt a shudder run down his spine. The thing's powerful body was topped by the great spherical worm head with its dark, sensitively quivering orifices. Beneath that crowning horror was the supple and iridescent serpent form, its hide gleaming a metallic green interspersed with flecks of red, yellow and blue.

The arms remained motionless. The four long, thin claw-fingers at the ends of the arms were fully extended. The towering body tapered toward the ground but even there where it supported itself with its tail its skin presented the same gorgeous pattern of colours. And now all of a sudden Ron was aware of the indescribable odour that came from the alien creature—a fragrance unknown anywhere else in the galaxy.

But now that the enemy had appeared, Ron's cool composure returned. His hand slipped to his belt and brought up the weapon. Without making any sudden movement that might shy the Evergreen away, Ron carefully placed the gun barrel on the window edge. He bent down and made sure of his aim.

Behind him he heard an uneasy sigh from Lofty.

Ron pressed the trigger. For just the fraction of a second there was a piercing hum but after that nothing happened. There was no beam of destructive fire and the Evergreen on the forest edge didn't even move. When Lofty gasped in new alarm, Ron straightened up.

"It's alright, Larry," he said calmly to Randall. "You can look around now. We'll be staying here for awhile."

It was then that the Evergreen began to move. Suddenly its great long body shot forward, carrying it 3 feet off the ground in a leap that brought it 10 feet closer as the thin elastic tail took up the shock of its landing. Immediately it gathered itself for a second jump.

Lofty began to squirm. "Shoot it," he yelled. "Try another weapon! It'll kill us all!"

Without moving from his position, Ron grasped him and pulled him closer to the window. "Just take it

easy," he said. "Nothing is going to happen to us." He could feel that Lofty was trembling.

Larry Randall, meanwhile, had left the flight controls to join them and now he merely watched with interest as the serpent monster approached in an elegant series of jumps. The thing came within 15 feet of the glider before it stopped. Then suddenly more than two-thirds of its serpentine body flexed downward and coiled into a circle on the ground. From the upper pair of arms upward, however, the Evergreen held an erect position and two of the quivering orifices in its spherical head seemed to stare at the aircraft like a pair of eyes.

"My God!" exclaimed Lofty. "That... that's the way they sit down when they want to communicate. It wants to talk to us! How did you manage it, Larry?"

\* \* \* \*

Ron activated the door and it rolled to one side. He had long since replaced the strange weapon in his belt—a gun that seemed strange to Lofty, at least, because it didn't appear to be capable of shooting anything. Ron simply came out of the ship and walked right up to the motionless Evergreen.

Lofty watched with wide-staring eyes. "He shouldn't... he's taking a chance!" he stammered. "He can't be sure if—" He stopped talking when Larry Randall also got out of the glider.

He was carrying a small instrument that mounted two small microphones on its upper face. Lofty recognized it. It was known as *atransec*, a translator box, a wonder machine that could learn an alien language a thousand times faster than the most talented human linguist.

Larry showed as little concern for his safety as Ron in spite of the close proximity of the Passa serpent. He placed the transec on the ground in front of him and unhooked the microphones, which proved to be on long, thin extension cords. Ron took one of them while Larry held the other one up toward the worm-like head of the Evergreen.

Lofty's curiosity got the best of him so in spite of his fears he finally clambered down out of the glider and joined his companions.

"We bring you greetings," said Ron into the microphone.

There was a singing, humming sound from the Evergreen. It was interspersed with an odd, lip-smacking noise which was the only consonant that the other language contained.

Instantly the transec's loudspeaker crackled and a voice was heard speaking in English: "Oh no, not today. I have to go home soon."

Ron stared at his microphone and then at the Evergreen. "We are glad that we have found you here," he assured the serpent.

There was an undulating whistling and high-pitched humming from the Evergreen, again intermixed with the smacking sound that was somewhat similar to a glottal stop. "If it were not so terribly cold I should have had a fine harvest today."



Ron turned to the others in bewilderment and Lofty chuckled.

"What's so funny?" Ron asked after turning off the mike. "What kind of nonsense is he speaking?"

Now Lofty was enjoying himself. "That's their way," he explained. "They have a custom of starting out with inconsequential talk before they get down to business. They seem to think it's a form of politeness for everybody to just chatter awhile about anything that comes to mind and not even to listen to what another person is saying."

A furrow appeared on Ron's forehead. "So? And how do you knock it off and get down to cases?"

"I wouldn't advise you to try it yet," said Lofty. "He'd think that was very impolite. Keep him going with a few side remarks, maybe 2 or 3 sentences that don't mean anything. Then tell him that his silly talk has been very amusing... and he'll change his tune right away."

Ron's frown deepened. "Now look, Lofty," he warned the other, "if you're pulling my leg I've got news for you!"

"No kidding, sir," Lofty reassured him. "I'm giving it to you straight. It's the only proper thing you can do!"

Ron clicked on the mike and raised it to his lips. In a serious tone he remarked: "Houses are usually square but of course you can make round ones, too."

The Evergreen answered: "Yes, and if I just had a few extra greens I could make a wonderful salad."

"Yesterday I just fell from the sky," Ron explained confidently.

"Don't ask me," replied the Evergreen. "I haven't been to the seashore in more than 3 years."

"If there weren't any caterpillars," retorted Ron in some desperation, "there wouldn't be any butterflies."

Whereupon the Evergreen assured him: "The worst thing, you know, is those lazy trees. If you lean against them they simply fall over."

Ron had made his countdown. He figured that he'd indulged in enough nonsense so that he would not appear to the Evergreen to be discourteous. Then he followed Lofty's advice and came to the point. "OK, it's been fun," he said. "This conversation has been very amusing."

The Evergreen answered quickly and very complacently. "And your words have been equally entertaining, my friend. It would please me to be of service to you."

"Why are you attacking the settlers?" asked Ron. The hardness of his tone indicated that he meant to get to the point as fast as possible now. He also added: "Why don't you furnish us with any more skins?"

"The Glorious One has come," answered the Evergreen. "He is the *Ssst* ... We pay him homage. He commands us and we obey."

The hissing sound meant that the word was untranslatable. Either there was no equivalent for it in the Terran language or the transec didn't yet have it in its vocabulary. Ron wondered what the "Ssst" part

could mean.

"Where does he come from?" he asked.

The Evergreen swayed its massive head. "How could I know the origin of the *Sssst*? He is everywhere and yet nowhere. When it pleases him he descends at any place he chooses, to remain for awhile."

"What does he look like?"

"Mighty and magnificent. His splendour blinds our vision."

"Where does he live?"

"There in the forest. Beyond the Mountain of *Sssst* ... in the Caverns of *Sssst*. We worship him there."

Ron stared sullenly at his microphone. What was the use of his efforts so far if the translator couldn't translate the most vital word in the whole conversation? He probed further: "What do you do with the prisoners you take?"

"We sacrifice them to the *Sssst*," answered the Evergreen calmly.

"And the dead Terrans?"

"We show them to him so that he may see that we make offerings to him even in battle."

A shudder came over Ron. He ended the interrogation with one last question: "In what direction lies the dwelling place of the Glorious One?"

The Evergreen nodded toward the forest. The gesture might have embraced an angle of about 30°. By Terran reckoning it was somewhere northeast by east. "Over there somewhere," answered the alien monstrosity. All in all, this piece of information wasn't any worse than what Ron had heard so far.

Long before this conversation, Ron had prepared a list of questions he hoped to ask of the first Evergreen he could hypnotize. At present he only had a part of the list checked off but he realized that he wasn't going to get very far with the rest of them under present circumstances. There were two things he hadn't counted on: the odd characteristics of Evergreen thinking plus the fact that the Passa settlers had never taken the trouble to look into the environment and customs of the indigenous inhabitants.

So all he could do was express his thanks to the serpent creature. But he followed this up with an instruction which astonished Lofty Patterson.

"You will remain here," he told the Evergreen, "until the sun has disappeared behind the roof of the house. Then you will get up and go wherever you please. But you will forget that we have met or that I asked you these questions. I..."

At this point he interrupted himself. For a second or two it seemed as if he wanted to add something. But then he turned to Lofty and Larry and snapped an order: "Let's continue onward!"

Larry picked up the transec apparatus and carried it back with him to his place in the ship. When Lofty climbed on board, confused and a bit benumbed, Larry was back at the flight controls. Ron sat down beside Lofty, the door closed and Larry lifted up. The glider came up to the level of the house roof under

which Andy Lever had been living until a few days ago. Then it swerved around over the house and headed toward the forest.

Lofty looked back. Below lay the Evergreen in its coils with the top 6 feet of its serpent body still erect. The creature did not move.

"How did you do that, sir?" he blurted out finally.

Ron shrugged his shoulders casually. "Terran technology has come up with quite a number of weapons," he answered. "Among others there are those which affect the central nervous system and cause the victim of the shot to be under the will of whoever's doing the shooting. Such weapons are called psycho-beamers. Their effect is called mechanico-hypnosis. We weren't entirely sure that the principle would work on the alien brain of an Evergreen... but as you can see, it took effect. When that fellow comes out of it down there in about an hour, he'll forget all about his meeting with us."

Lofty gazed ahead in silence for awhile but finally asked another question. "At the end there, you were about to say something else to him, weren't you?"

Ron smiled. "You're a sharp observer, Lofty. Yes, I was about to tell him not to touch another Terran in his life, let alone take any prisoners or to kill them."

"Sounds like a good idea," Lofty agreed. "Why didn't you tell him?"

Ron took his time before answering. "This thing called Ssst is probably pretty shrewd, whatever it is. It might get suspicious if it saw one of its subjects suddenly unwilling to bring him Terrans to the sacrifice. And we want to avoid all suspicions—until we have the monster in our hands."

#### 4/ GLASS DRUMS, DARK IDOLS

*Be not angered against us, O thou Majestic and Incomparable One! The sacrifices become fewer and our warriors are hard beset to capture them. Spurn us not, O Mighty One! We move to bring thee further offerings. Be patient with us O thou Invincible One, Ayaa-Oooy...!*

\* \* \* \*

The glider was not like others. It had been brought from Earth on board the *Laramie*. Its powerful generators were capable of building a defence screen around it that made it invulnerable, provided that at least 10 heavy ship's guns were not concentrated on it simultaneously.

By sunset the small expedition had put the forest boundary 300 km behind it. Lofty demonstrated his exceptional memory by calling out minor details of the terrain below even before they could be seen from the glider. This was in spite of the fact that he hadn't seen the forest interior for the past 10 years and he

hadn't been in this particular region for at least 20 years.

"Now a river should be showing up soon," he announced as the blue sun prepared to disappear behind the glassy horizon. "It flows from north-northeast to south-southwest—not very wide. In some places the trees even touch each other over the water."

Ron nodded with satisfaction. "Good. That's where we'll look for a place to land."

Lofty squirmed a bit uncomfortably in his seat. "You're sure that defence screen is all it's cracked up to be?"

"Yes, of course. Why?"

"I mean so even the little varmints can't get through like the Passa beetles, for example."

Ron shook his head. "Not even an air molecule, Lofty. Does that make you feel better?"

"It certainly does. It's just that it's hard for outsiders to really appreciate the dangers that lurk here in the forest. There's a lot of obnoxious crits here. Many of them are so small you'd figure they couldn't do anything. Until they've crept under your skin and start wandering around inside your carcass. Then the victim is lucky if he finds a doctor in time who understands Passa medicine. Otherwise it's over with in a hurry."

Ron did not reply. Far ahead the channel of the predicted river appeared as a dark line in the blue-shimmering forest. The brilliant white glare of daylight had subsided by now and the turquoise ball on the horizon cast the world under a spell of unreality. But there where the shadows of night should have been rising was a reddish patch of sky that grew brighter from minute to minute, adding a new profusion of colouration to the sky. This was the harbinger of the giant red sun which would be rising an hour after its blue companion had set.

Larry brought the glider slightly higher in order to obtain a better overview of the terrain. A few minutes later the small river lay directly beneath them like a long, twisted worm. The narrow ribbon of water was black in the midst of a turquoise splendour.

Small peninsulas had been built up by the winding course of the river and Ron chose one of these for their camping place. Larry dropped the glider into such a steep descent that Lofty began to complain. Just as the blue sun touched the horizon the aircraft's small thermo-beams, started to work. They burned away the strange, glasslike growths below until finally the peninsula was completely cleared and the glider had a level, flat place to land.

After Lofty had gotten out and stretched his legs, his first concern was for the protective screen which he quite obviously still distrusted. Swarms of insects were buzzing about in the warm air over the water. It was twilight now and when he turned on a hand-lamp they came in a cloud toward the source of the light. Lofty was satisfied when he saw the eager, humming little creatures suddenly stop in mid-flight as they came up against an invisible barrier. They danced and tumbled about as though in a drunken stupor for awhile; then they tried another assault and again failed to penetrate that something in the air which to them was both invisible and incomprehensible. Yet in spite of this, Lofty got down on his knees and felt of the invisible wall suspiciously.

"That's pretty good," he said finally with approval. "An energy screen like this is a fine invention."

Larry set about preparing an evening meal. He opened up a number of containers which spontaneously heated their own contents, causing an enticing aroma to pervade the screened-in area of the camp. They had a full, leisurely meal while the river made a soft sound of rushing water past the end of the peninsula and the still warm air was suffused by a pale brown twilight as the blue sun disappeared and the sky gradually reddened in an opposite direction.

The forest behind them and across the river was full of other strange sounds. Larry suddenly tensed and gulped when he thought he heard eerie laughter ringing out close behind him. Lofty's eyes twinkled in amusement at the startled expression of his inexperienced companion.

He finally explained. "That's a 'night chuckler'. You'd be amazed if you could see it. It's not any bigger than my hand and as ugly as evolution can make a creature—half frog, half locust. Of course it doesn't make that noise with its mouth. It rubs its thick forelegs together."

Some time later the night air suddenly vibrated with a dull, thundering sound. It was something like the roaring of an antiquated jet plane strafing the ground at close range. According to Lofty it was nothing more than the battle cry of a 'glass buffalo'. And he explained that in spite of the impressive name the author of the sound was no larger than a rabbit.

Thus the time passed while the two agents listened to the forest sounds and Lofty continued to describe their various sources. Until suddenly the drumming began.

Actually no one but Lofty was in a position to identify this new sound. It began with a deep, vibrating tone as if someone had struck a giant bell somewhere in the distance. Lofty listened keenly to the reverberations. Larry was about to say something but the old man hastily motioned him to silence.

The bell-like drumming swelled louder. Then the pitch suddenly changed to a higher note. Shortly after that it lowered again but not as deeply as the original sound. And thus it continued. The sound kept changing in volume and pitch at irregular intervals. Lofty still gave his undivided attention to the strange symphony.

The drumming finally ended although in a short while it started up again more faintly as though from a greater distance. And now Lofty seemed ready to explain what it was all about.

"It's the Evergreens," he said with a note of excitement in his voice. "They're sending signals. They use a kind of drum when they do it. Actually they use a number of long, hollow glass trunks supported on a framework. I understand a little of their drum talk," he continued. "They express certain meanings with different tones and volumes. Naturally it's a primitive sort of language and its range of meanings isn't very great. But it's enough for them."

Ron nodded. "Alright then, Lofty—what did you get from it?"

Lofty scratched his head. "Well now, if I hadn't heard it with my own ears and somebody else had told me about it I would have thought he was out of his mind. But it sure looks as if the Evergreens have really found themselves a god or an idol of some kind and somewhere back in the forest they worship the thing. The drums seem to say that the god should not lose its patience and leave them. They say they'll soon manage to bring more sacrifices to it."

Ron and Larry were not too much surprised.

"Now we know where the *Sssst* is located," Larry muttered.

"Does it have a name?" Ron asked.

"I can't say," Lofty answered. "That drum talk is different from the regular language of the Evergreens. For example their spoken word *uuuuchi* is just another drum tone when they convert it. You can pick up concepts but there are no actual words."

"I see," said Ron thoughtfully. "There's no relationship between the drum talk and the phonetic system of their everyday language."

"Yeah, you might put it that way," Lofty admitted.

Ron listened for awhile to the eerie sound of the distant drumming and then asked: "Do they say anything about us?"

Lofty shook his head. "Not a hint so far."

"I have another question," interjected Larry. "Would the Evergreens mention something about us if they knew we were here in their forest?"

Lofty answered without hesitation: "You can bet on it."

"Then since they don't say anything about us," pursued Larry, "wouldn't that mean that they aren't aware of our arrival?"

"Yes, I'm sure of that."

Larry nodded, satisfied. "That's good," he growled. "I wouldn't like their strange god to become aware of us too soon. Otherwise it could make some trouble for us."

He winked at Ron when he said this and Lofty suddenly had the impression that there was a secret between the two that he didn't know about.

\* \* \* \*

Long after the blue sun had gone down and the red orb began to rise, the Evergreen Ron had spoken to remained sitting on the ground behind Andy Lever's house.

He had no perception of the renewing splendour of his world as the deep red light of the mighty sun flooded over the land and the great ball of fire rose as big as a moon into the yellowing sky. In the first place he was accustomed to such a sight because Passa was his habitat and all his life, other than the blue star, he had not seen anything else than this giant red one there in the yellow sky. And in the second place he was busy racking his brains about something.

He remembered that he was supposed to do something. He was supposed to get up and continue on his way. So why didn't he go? He tried to rise up but didn't succeed. Something wasn't as it should be. He must have forgotten something.

But what was it?

\* \* \* \*

The next morning before the blue sun came up, Ron took the controls and lifted the glider from the peninsula. Lofty had given him to understand that he had never been farther than this particular river and that now they were penetrating a region where no Terran had ever set foot.

Beyond the river there were not even any more names to go by. The river was called Windside—why, nobody knew—and it was the last westerly point of topographical reference with any name at all. Which meant that in the course of the colony's history on Passa no one had come farther than this even in a glider.

Farther west was unexplored territory. After an hour's flight the mountains that emerged above the horizon were also nameless. Fifty-four years ago the survey units of the Terran Fleet had flown over them and had only noted their position on a general map of the planet. They had left the naming of such landmarks to the settlers since this was their prerogative but the settlers had never come this far.

Lofty's information caused Ron Landry to have new misgivings concerning the possible success of the expedition. Fresh in his mind were Nike Quinto's admonishments, reminding him that the Springers had no doubt infiltrated here and that they would probably use any one of a number of their famous tricks in order to break up the friendly relations between Terrans and the native inhabitants. If this were actually the case, then the 3-man glider team was liable to run into some very respectable opposition, once the goal was reached.

Once beyond the mountains they would be more than 1000 km from Modessa, which was the nearest city. Of course distance itself was not a prime factor if it should become necessary to send a distress signal. Froyd Coleman and Maj. Bushnell could be informed immediately of what was going on out here in the unexplored hinterlands of the forest country. But Bushnell was only just now in the process of re-deploying his surveillance fleet so that a part of it could be called upon for help, if worse came to worst. In a matter of 5 or 6 days he might even be able to send in a few destroyers as backup if Ron should call for them. In the interim they were dependent upon what Froyd Coleman could do—and presumably that wouldn't be much more than the dispatch of 20 or 30 gliders with 2 or 3 hundred men, which would require a day and a half to get to the target area, and maybe a pair of planes that wouldn't be able to do much in the rugged mountain terrain.

It was not possible to wait until Bushnell took care of his redeployment tactics. Every day of inaction would give the Springers more of a chance to strengthen their position. They had to be attacked as soon as possible.

And besides, Bushnell's fleet destroyers were to be used as a last resort, because the Evergreens must not be frightened. It was a cornerstone of the colonial psychological policy that the superiority of Terran technology was never to be demonstrated to the natives in any destructive sense. Experience had shown that from that moment on the native relationship to Terrans would be based solely on fear rather than on friendship.

So no matter from what angle the situation was regarded, the small expedition's prospects did not appear to be particularly rosy. Actually they had only one advantage they might rely on in this case: this idol or god thing that was no doubt something concocted by the Springers was still unaware of their approach.

Perhaps the element of surprise would be a means of solving the problem in a hurry.

\* \* \* \*

By the time the blue sun was again high in the sky, the Evergreen was still sitting where Ron and Larry had left him. He sensed hunger and thirst and his skin began to itch because it was starting to be the time for moulting. However, he couldn't shed his skin because for that he needed the branch of a glass tree where he could hang by his tail with his head toward the ground. How was he supposed to do that when he couldn't move?

He kept on racking his brain in an attempt to discover what he had forgotten and why his muscles wouldn't obey him. A sense of panic awakened in him when he realized that if he didn't soon recall what the trouble was he could die of thirst or hunger in this isolated region or maybe even smother in his own skin. But this awareness did not improve the situation. His thoughts became confused, on the one hand being occupied with the crisis in which he found himself and on the other hand trying to remember what it was that had made him stiff and incapacitated.

What was it?

\* \* \* \*

When they flew over the mountains, Ron Landry turned on the translator device and let the tape play back the conversation he had had with the Evergreen. Where the creature had referred to the Mountains of *Ssst*, Ron stopped the machine. He had the selector erase the hissing sound from the tape and in its place he spoke the word Midland into one of the two microphones. After that he rewound and played back again. This time the human voice of the transec spoke the corrected portion without any trace of interruption: "There in the forest. Beyond the Midland Mountains..."

Finally he entered the new word onto the map where only the mountain chain itself was indicated and thus the geography of Passa acquired a new name. In the future when anyone spoke to an Evergreen concerning the Midland Mountains he would not have to ponder over the location. Each year all positronic translator devices on Passa were processed for a coupled interchange of all new expressions. Ron himself would see to it that the name was entered onto the maps.

The name Midland had not been chosen arbitrarily. Judging from the map the mountainous formation lay fairly in the middle of the great equatorial continent.

Ron flew close to the slopes and canyons of the mountains so that he'd have a better chance of



penetrating farther east without being spotted by the Springers. The glass forest grew at astonishing altitudes, even at the 16,000-foot level. Beyond that point, however, there was not even any transition zone where one might have expected the less pretentious plant forms to taper upwards into the rocky desolation of the heights. Instead the naked rock began precisely at the edge of the forest. Otherwise the same picture presented itself below them—the endless glassy mantle of the forest.

On this day the glider moved into the eastern foothills. The search for a campsite was much more time-consuming than it had been on the previous day. This time they couldn't clear a place below them with the thermo-beams because the brilliant glare had to be avoided wherever possible. Also any such noise would attract the Evergreens' attention. Lofty cautioned that the creatures had an unusually keen sense of hearing and were able to detect a quietly spoken word even at 200 meters.

So Ron kept on looking until he found a place in the glass thickets of the forest that seemed to be less overgrown than its surroundings. He let the glider down carefully while slowly bending the elastic glass trunks in all directions. Finally they were far enough below the main treetops and deep enough in the shadow of the forest so that the thermo-beams could be brought into play. They were only used in short bursts and with long pauses between so that it required almost an hour to clear the growths from an area sufficiently large enough for making camp.

On this particular evening they did not find the same kind of romantic fascination in their wild surroundings as they had on the previous night in their campsite on the river peninsula. They were in the region of their objective and here lurked the enemy. No one knew when he might strike.

\* \* \* \*

When the twilight hour arrived again, the Evergreen was still pondering. Of course by now his thoughts were almost exclusively occupied with the melancholy contemplation of the fate that awaited him when his great body became so weakened by hunger and thirst and the debilitating heat that it would finally collapse, causing his moulting skin to block the normal breathing of his pores. He could hardly think anymore of the fact that he had forgotten something important or that he might be saved if he could remember it. By this time he had given up hope.

Shortly before the red sun came up, three men discovered him in this condition. They had come over the forest in a flying vehicle that was similar in operating principle to Ron Landry's glider. It was not by chance that they had come to this particular area. They knew that one of the Evergreen tribes deep in the forest was missing one of its members. And here they found him behind Andy Lever's house.

These men were tall and broad-shouldered. When they spoke their voices were so loud and unrestrained that one might have thought the entire world was their exclusive property. They laughed a lot and they even roared with laughter when they found the Evergreen in his pitiable state.

They brought with them an apparatus that was similar in its operation to the Terran transec. With this translator device they questioned the unfortunate creature, demanding to know why he didn't move and who told him he was supposed to sit there and never get up. The answers they were able to obtain were confused and incoherent. They tried to force the Evergreen to stand up but they did not succeed. His muscles appeared to be tied into knots that refused to be unloosened. The only thing they could do finally was to load him on board their vehicle by using a winch and then to start their return journey.

They had a very definite idea of what had happened to the Evergreen; it was a suspicion that was apparently so unsettling to them that they seemed to laugh much less than before. They believed that with the aid of equipment and medications in their hidden camp they would be able to restore the unhappy serpent's memory so that they could find out who had been the cause of his plight.

However, the laws of Nature came into play and upset their plans. While en route the Evergreen began to go into the final stages of moulting without their realizing it. The half-loosened old skin obstructed the breathing of the new epidermis and so when the glider finally landed the three men with their loud laughter and bellowing voices found themselves in possession of a sweet-smelling hide and something that was of far less value—the corpse of an Evergreen.

And so it was that one of the unfortunate aborigines of Passa lost its life because it didn't know what a 'house' was. Its instructions had been: "You will remain here until the sun has disappeared behind the roof of the house..."

Since it did not know what a house was, however, and had no way of figuring it out, it also had failed to realize when it was supposed to get up and continue on its way. Thus it had sat there until overcome with hunger and thirst and its skin began to shed. The poor thing had died of ignorance.

## 5/ TRAIL OF THE UNKNOWN

*Misfortune is upon us, thou Magnificence! The Prince of Darkness, Uuuyi-Iiio, casts his shadow upon us, thy poor servants. Stand by us always, mighty Ayaa-Oooy! O help thy children, Wisest of the Wise...!*

\* \* \* \*

Ron Landry ruffled swiftly through the pages of his notebook while Larry looked on attentively. Meanwhile, Lofty Patterson was poking around in the empty food containers to see if he could find any leftovers from their meal.

Finally Ron pocketed the notebook. "Bushnell's fleet only reports two bogey blips in the past few months—that is, tracking signals apparently caused by intangible objects."

Larry rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "So what do they do in cases like that?"

"Both times the blips were picked up by Passa ground stations. Just momentary flashes on their screens that faded in a few moments. They questioned the mobile stations out in space about them and were informed that the monitors there had not shown a thing. As a result they merely logged it for the record."

"I see," said Larry. "In other words, on the assumption that if something had come from the outside, the

ship stations would have tracked it—right?"

"Yes, and you can't say it isn't a reasonable assumption."

Larry raised a hand in protest. "Sure, if you forget that there are a few very hot pilots around who can shave out of a hyperjump practically at the surface of a planet and at entry velocities low enough not to burn them up. There are such maniacs, you know. We have a few in our own fleet."

Ron nodded. "Right you are. But now you've got to explain what happens to the warp shocks when a ship enters or exits a transition. What about that?"

"I was going to bring that up next. What happened to the hypersensors? At the same time those blips were seen, shouldn't they have registered the shocks?"

"Now comes the cute part," said Ron, smiling suddenly. "Those so-called phantom blips were spaced 15 days apart, by Passa time. One of them was in the early A.M. The other was in the twilight hour." He watched Larry expectantly.

"Alright, and so...!"

"They were exactly timed to match the takeoff of a freighter in each case—both of them bound for Terra and making a transition entry while still close to Passa."

\* \* \* \*

When the great red sun was high in the sky, Ron and Lofty prepared to do some reconnoitring. Lofty was issued a thermo hand-beamer which he was proud to possess. He could hardly be prevailed upon to put it in his belt. Ron was similarly armed but also took along the weapon that he referred to as a psycho-beamer. With the latter item he could be sure of keeping the Evergreens in the dark as to their purposes. They were not yet worried about the Springers. If their suspicions were correct, those phantom blips picked up by Bushnell's tracking stations meant that a couple of Springer spaceships had made a break-neck landing somewhere and they would probably be hidden between the mountains to the West. Ron could not conceive of them operating in the open among the Evergreens. Presumably they kept in the background and managed to influence the natives with their idol or whatever the *Sssst* thing was.

Ron's first objective was to determine whether or not the region they had landed in was cavernous enough to deserve the designation, the Caves of *Sssst*. This he considered to be a fairly easy task that would not be particularly dangerous. When he set out with Lofty, however, he couldn't know that things were going to be different than he expected.

By means of a portable transceiver they were able to maintain contact with Larry Randall, who had remained to guard the glider. Of course Ron had stipulated that they were only supposed to communicate in case of an extreme emergency, because if any Springers were in the area they'd probably have similar equipment and would be able to pick up the conversation.

Lofty started out in a northeasterly direction toward the most rugged part of the region. With a skill and

dexterity that Ron would not have attributed to him, he wound his way expertly between the glass tree trunks. In places where Ron couldn't push through the oldster displayed remarkable strength in holding back the underbrush long enough for him to get through the openings thus provided. By this means they made faster progress than Ron had expected.

Although the red sun overhead was a giant, its brilliance was dwarfed by that of its companion star which was the actual daystar of Passa. Also, in spite of the semi-transparency of the foliage here the forest still obscured some of the weak illumination. At ground level the glass jungle created a twilight in which it would have been difficult to read a newspaper. A further problem was the fact that after the red sunlight had filtered down through the top of the forest its rays were widely scattered by multiple refraction. All around Ron was a dimly glittering confusion that blurred the outlines of every object and quickly tired the eyes.

Lofty suddenly came to a stop just when Ron was pressing through a thicket of young glass saplings. He noticed it too late and bumped into the older man's thin but wiry back. Lofty's reaction was astonishing. He bent over sideways instantly and flung out his arm to gain leverage from a nearby trunk, whereupon he pushed backward with such strength that he came within a hair of capsizing Ron entirely. Ron let out a curse but Lofty whirled and slapped a hand across his mouth. So he finally got the idea that something unusual must be happening. He calmed down at once and pulled Lofty's hand away.

Silently, Lofty pointed at something that was in front of him by a fallen tree trunk and Ron peered over his shoulder. At first he could see nothing but the usual dim glitter of reddish twilight and what seemed to be a black hole but which was actually a small clearing on the forest floor. However, the dark spot suddenly acquired contours as well as movement. Ron saw an animal which was as large as a rat and had a similar appearance. As his eyes became more accustomed to the dim illumination he realized that the animal was not whole. Its hind portion was missing and yet it seemed to move.

He marvelled at this and bent down to have a closer look but then he felt Lofty's gentle but firm grip on his collar. He stared at the half of a rat in front of him and saw that what was keeping it in motion was a swarm of beetles. They appeared to be black in colour and were individually about half the size of a thumb. Actually the motion of the animal was an illusion. What was really happening was that it was being eaten alive. The beetles were consuming the body so rapidly that the rat seemed to be creeping into the swarm while gradually disappearing in the process.

Now Ron could understand Lofty's sudden alarm. If Ron had pushed him one more step forward when he collided with him he would have put his foot right in the middle of the voracious creatures. By the speed with which they were consuming the rat it was easy to imagine that it would only have taken them a few seconds to penetrate the plastic leather of Lofty's boot and get into his flesh.

Apparently they were also sensitive to sound. When Ron moved his foot into a more comfortable position they seemed to hear the faint rustling it made and they became motionless for an instant. Two or three of them went toward the source of the sound but when there was no repetition of the noise they soon returned to their ghastly feast.

Ron felt slightly nauseated. Carefully he drew the psychobeamer from his belt and aimed it at the swarm of carrion beetles. When he pressed the trigger their movements ceased immediately. Several of them were knocked into the air by the silent shot but they simply fell back and lay still. The energy charge that would have caused an intelligent being to surrender his will was sufficient to destroy their tiny insect brains.

"Passa beetles," Lofty finally announced. "Worst part isn't the pain they cause when they grab onto you.

They don't eat that fast with just their teeth or whatever you call those choppers—they spit out a juice that dissolves what they're working on and practically all they have to do is suck in. The stuff is a hellish poison when it gets into the blood stream."

For a long moment Ron felt helplessly weak. If Lofty hadn't been with him he could well imagine that he might have simply stamped right into the deadly swarm. He pulled himself together and when Lofty continued the march again he resolved to be more careful.

The terrain suddenly rose upward steeply. Without any apparent reason the glass tree trunks were not as close together here as before, so in spite of the incline the two men moved ahead more swiftly. Finally, Lofty again came to a sudden stop. Ron discovered that they were standing in a small circular clearing, which was strange since he recalled having seen no openings in this area when he had flown over it in the glider. Looking upward he noted that the trees arched together overhead in such a manner that they provided as thick a coverage as anywhere else, if seen from above. Several of the trees that concealed the clearing were growing at a higher level on top of a rocky ledge to his left. When he looked more closely at this outcropping of stone he discovered that there was a deeper darkness under its rim that must have been several meters in width and height.

In other words he was looking at the entrance of one of the caves he'd been searching for.

He was about to step past Lofty to have a closer look at it when Lofty blocked him with an arm.

"Take it easy!" whispered the old-timer. "You can never tell what might be hiding in there."

Lofty bent down and took a close look at the ground. He finally picked up a few small stones and threw them into the cave opening. Ron could hear them clattering against the walls inside. But it was the only sound—nothing more.

"OK," said Lofty, "now throw a light beam into it from where you're standing. If nothing comes shooting, flying, creeping or slithering out of there, then maybe we can be fairly sure the cave is empty."

Ron followed his advice. He switched on his hand lamp and aimed its brilliant beam into the cavern's entrance. Inside there was a reflected glitter from jagged walls but he also noticed that there was a still deeper darkness beyond where the shaft of light became lost without reaching the end of the cave. At any rate there was nothing to be seen of the things that Lofty had feared might be in there. The cave was empty.

"Alright," Lofty grunted, "so now you can take a look around inside. But what do you expect to find?"

Ron wasn't sure, even though he had expected to find caves in this area. The mystery of the strange god Ssst was connected with the caverns. It seemed to be the simplest expedient to go into the caves and take a look around if he wanted to uncover the secret. This in itself might have been sufficient motivation but now Ron had a feeling that something in the depths of the cavern was drawing him as though by some magical power; and so it was only partially on his own volition that he stepped through the dark entrance. It was an impulse he would have been unable to explain to Lofty if the latter had challenged him face to face.

However, now that the old man had seen for himself that the place was empty he had apparently lose his sense of uneasiness. He walked closely behind Ron but with a quick and confident step, while looking about him in all directions. After another 10 meters, Ron again directed the light beam from his lamp into the back of the cavern. The results were the same as before. The shaft of light still did not reveal any end

to the place.

They continued onward. The bare rock walls offered nothing to their inspection other than a seepage of water droplets here and there. But the weird spell of attraction that came from the abyss of darkness ahead was somehow oppressive. Ron stopped to look at Lofty, who seemed normally curious but at ease. Apparently he had sensed nothing of the bewitchment of the place. This irritated Ron. Why didn't the old fool feel anything? he asked himself. Am I alone susceptible to it? he thought.

And in that moment Lofty commented: "I guess we can turn around and go back. We won't find anything more in here."

Ron found it difficult to control his anger. "I'll decide what we're going to do, Lofty!" he snapped at him. "Just remember that!"

Lofty looked at him in astonishment and then his expression changed. His smile and little wrinkles of cheerfulness, disappeared, to be replaced by a grimace of derision and scorn. "Oh, is that so?" he chuckled maliciously. "Then you just get on by yourself. Far as I'm concerned I'm going back. And from now on when you have to sneak through the woods all by yourself, don't forget all the pointers I gave you. Otherwise—" He motioned vaguely with his hands as if to demonstrate what could happen.

"Oh, so now your true colours come out!" Ron snarled at him. "Leave me in the lurch, will you?" He drew his weapon. "Well, you're not getting away that easily, chum. You're going to stay here with me!"

Something in Lofty's look warned him. The old man did not seem to be impressed by the drawn weapon. He looked beyond Ron as though something new were to be seen in the depths of the cave. And Ron fell for the oldest trick in the world. He whirled around but realized his mistake too late. The butt of Lofty's thermo-gun came down on his head and he fell to the ground. His shoulder struck a protrusion and the pain of it made him rise up again.

Lofty had been surprisingly quick. Ron could see him now through a mist of pain and nausea, coming at him with his fists. As he ducked sideways, Lofty crashed against the jagged wall and let out a yell of rage. Ron was still too slow because the other's bruised fists didn't seem to deter him. Lofty clamped his hands together and brought them down on Ron's head like a club while simultaneously ramming a knee into his stomach.

He crashed to the ground a second time but by now his temper had reached a stage where pain and nausea were secondary. He was back on his feet in a flash and was charging at Lofty like a battering ram. Yet all the while there was a voice somewhere in the back of his mind that kept trying to tell him all of this was madness, that actually he didn't hate Lofty at all and there was no reason to be fighting him like this. It also told him that Lofty had nothing against him, either, and that both of them were carrying on like a couple of grade-A skons.

But he didn't listen to this voice. He was fully worked up now and he simply lit into Lofty with no holds barred. He heard the old man let out a shrill, sharp cry—and then he himself banged head first against the dark wall of the cave.

It was one blow too many. A giant bell hammer clanged inside his brain as if his skull was ready to crack and then he dropped to his knees as he lost consciousness.

## 6/ IN THE CAVERNS OF SSST

*Triumph, O Glorious One! Joy is upon thy children! Three new sacrifices shall we bring thee and then shalt thou praise our faithfulness to thee! Kings were these among their tribes and their names are on the lips of unbelievers. Thy grace returns to us, O Mighty One, and we praise thy name forever, Ayaa-Oooy...!*

\* \* \* \*

Larry laboured strenuously to gather the fragments of memory and reassemble them in his mind so as to form some sort of coherent pattern. All this was going on while his eyes were closed. There was something in him that made him wish that he could continue to keep his eyes shut so as not to have to look at his surroundings. Nor was there any motivation in him to counteract the inclination.

He had been sitting in front of the glider while observing the eerie shimmer and sparkle of the glass tree trunks in the dull red light. He was wondering about the possibilities of making a tourist planet out of Passa—a place where wealthy Terrans could come for an exotic vacation. This had led him to philosophizing and he reflected that a mere 200 years ago the men of Earth didn't even have a good idea of what an airplane was. Except for a few pioneers the idea of a journey to the stars was considered to be preposterous and even the pioneers had been ridiculed.

But when Perry Rhodan had made his debut on the stage of history, things had changed swiftly and fundamentally. By now Terra had progressed to the point where it had to protect its colonies from hordes of wealthy adventurers. Not only the colonies but also the primitive inhabitants which were to be found on many of the planets.

Larry remembered that he had suddenly become angered at the Terrans, in spite of being one himself. After all, what were the Terrans doing, actually? In their spaceships they stormed their way through the galaxy and subjugated one world after another. They gave the indigenous peoples no chance at all to live lives of their own.

Was this a race worth belonging to? No—not by any means. Larry's rage reached a murderous peak. He would have been ready to kill Ron or Lofty if they had been there. So it was that the glider, a product of Terran technology, became an object upon which he could vent his anger. He also recalled having had just a momentary flash of conscience, as though standing aside and watching himself as some kind of madman, yet he had swung aboard the glider and used the butt-end of his gun to start smashing the control panels. He remembered tearing out pushbuttons and switches until finally he must have got an electric shock of some kind, because his memory did not reach beyond that point.

What a piece of insanity, he thought. Whatever had given him such an idiotic compulsion? He tried to turn on his side but his shoulder struck something hard and unyielding. Then he began to really wonder where he was. Finally his curiosity overcame his desire not to look at his surroundings. He opened his eyes.

The first sensation was one of being blinded by a powerful source of yellow-white light. He narrowed his eyes to mere slits so that he could accustom himself to the sudden brilliance. The second thing he noticed was that the warm air around him was laden with a wondrous aroma. The pleasant smell seemed to be familiar, somehow, but it was some time before his confused mind could register the fact that the air carried the scent of Evergreen skins. Judging by the hardness under him he was lying somewhere on a stone floor. He figured that if he sat up he'd be able to see more than just the glare of light—so he sat up.

What he saw then was far less impersonal than the bright light and far less pleasant than the aroma of Passa perfume. He was looking at a chamber of astonishing dimensions and found himself to be located against one of the side walls but there on the floor of the chamber were at least a thousand humans who seemed to be no better off than himself. Most of them lay quietly on their backs and stared at the ceiling, which arched overhead at an average height of about 25 feet. A few of them had gotten up onto their elbows and were looking about them with a little more interest in their surroundings. And finally he saw two men nearby who were standing together by the wall and seemed to be engaged in a conversation.

Larry didn't recognize any of those who were lying on the floor or even those who had raised up onto their elbows. But it was easy to guess that they were at least a portion of the people that the Evergreens had kidnapped, including those whose punitive expedition against the Evergreens had met with such surprising defeat.

On the other hand, the two men over there by the wall were obviously none other than Ron Landry and Lofty Patterson. It was a shock to Larry when he recognized them but he got up and went over to them. Certainly it must have been another shock for them to see a man suddenly get up from all the ones who were lying there—a phenomenon in the midst of lethargy. When Ron and Lofty interrupted their conversation to stare at him he caught their sudden expression of astonishment mixed with dismay.

He could well understand their feelings. Somehow they had fallen into the hands of the Evergreens or the Springers but they had not been aware that he was also present in the chamber. They had not seen him in the midst of the numerous captives and had been hoping, no doubt, that he would be bringing them help. And now here he was beside them, also a prisoner.

"I'm sorry," was the first thing he said. "It seems that they caught me too."

Ron asked him to tell what had happened to him and listened carefully to his brief report. Then he turned to Lofty. "The same effect," he said. "He suddenly went into a rage without knowing why."

Lofty made a wry face. "You might as well know," he said to Larry, "that the two of us went out of our minds and tried to crack each other's skulls."

Ron told him in a few words how they had found the cave and what had happened after that. Larry's amazement grew when he realized the unmistakable reality of the situation: that somebody had deliberately and effectively made use of a new kind of weapon—a weapon that could cause humans to become so enraged at each other that they were overcome by a compulsion to kill and destroy. It seemed to suppress the processes of reason entirely and drive its victims to actions which would have been impossible for them to even think of under normal conditions.

Larry met Ron's gaze. "Who?" he asked calmly.

Ron had expected the question. "We don't know," he answered, but then hastily corrected himself: "Not yet!"



Larry was about to ask something but was interrupted by a commotion at the far end of the room. He recognized the figures of three Evergreens who moved toward the apathetic crowd on the floor in their inimitable loping hops. It was hard to see where they had come from since there didn't seem to be any doors in the walls. At any rate the sight of the serpent people shattered the local apathy. The Terran captives jumped up with shrieks and wails of alarm and scattered in every direction at the approach of the Evergreens. The miserable spectacle filled Larry with revulsion. He wanted to run and block the stream of fugitives and shout them down, telling them what miserable cowards they were to let a mere three Evergreens put them to flight. But he had not taken the first step before he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"Take it easy, buddy," Ron told him in an unusually calm tone of voice. "It wouldn't do any good. There may be more Evergreens lurking behind these walls than we think. And take a look at your gun belt!"

Larry grabbed for his weapon holster. What a fool he had been! Naturally they wouldn't have forgotten to take the beamer from him when they brought him here. Ron was right. They couldn't do anything against the Evergreens—at least not at the present moment.

The three hopping serpents reached the tail end of the fleeing mob while the front lines were already jamming up against the cavern wall. Larry saw each of the Evergreens pick up one man apiece. Holding them over their heads they turned around and retreated with their prisoners. Everything happened so fast that he only began to understand what was going on when the Evergreens reached the rear wall of the chamber. There where no one would have suspected a door a semi-dark opening yawned before them.

They were fetching sacrifice victims! Offerings for their bloodthirsty inhuman god!

The three captives being carried off by the Evergreens apparently knew very well what their fate was going to be because their screams were audible above the general tumult in the cavern. Larry saw them wriggling and flailing about in the talons of the snake monsters. He saw their faces turn blood red in their frantic struggle to get free and he heard the terror of death in the cry of the last one as he was carried through the dark opening and the door started to close.

\* \* \* \*

After this incident there was not much left of Larry's self-possession. With his bare hands he was ready to strangle the Evergreens and whatever it was that had enticed them to commit such deeds. Lofty had become very reticent and all his cheerful crinkles had disappeared. When spoken to he made no reply.

It seemed that Ron was the only one who was still able to think rationally, to whatever extent it was necessary at the moment. He noted that the prisoners were drifting back through the cavern and distributing themselves more evenly as they flopped down again on the floor. It almost seemed as if they had forgotten the ghastly event. Relieved to find that they had not been the ones to be taken this time, they all sank back into their former state of apathy.

Ron knew the cause of this apathy. He knew what he would find if he were to go along the walls and search for an exit: nothing. The same thing that the others must have discovered already, whether searching singly or in groups. There was no way out. At least none that could be opened from the inside. And even if they could open such a door, undoubtedly there were enough Evergreens on the other side

to thwart any such attempt at an outbreak. There was still another reason for their discouragement. This cavern lay somewhere in the middle of the glass forest wilderness. The western rim of the forest—in itself 500 km removed from the nearest city—was all of 1,000 km away. And who would venture to attempt such a trek?

When Ron set out nevertheless to examine the walls he did it first of all because he preferred to trust his own eyes particularly since they were more especially trained than the others—and in the second place he was convinced that it was better to do something practically senseless rather than just sit there inactively and drown in the general bog of apathy.

The chamber was about 100 meters long and half as wide. All in all his tour of inspection would have to cover 300 meters—300 meters of grey, jagged rock that he would have to look at inch by inch. It was no small task. He left Lofty and Larry behind him because they seemed to have no inclination to join him.

After moving along only a few steps he suddenly realized why this solo trip would be useful. He would be able to think without being distracted by Larry's sullen grumbling and Lofty's withdrawn and melancholy disposition. There were still several items which definitely needed some special cogitation.

\* \* \* \*

For instance there was the matter of the illumination here in the cavern. A row of fluorescent-type lighting tubes had been clamped to the ceiling in a very hurried and jury-rigged fashion. Some of them were loose and banging crooked. Wires led across the unfinished rock into a few outlet holes. But however hastily the lighting units may have been installed the fact remained that the Evergreens knew nothing about electrical lighting. So these lamps were the first concrete evidence that the Springers really had their fingers in what was happening on Passa. Another proof was the exit door he had seen, which silently opened and closed without anyone having to turn a knob. That too, must have been installed by the Springers. It was they who had set up this entire subterranean prisoner camp.

Why? Why should they care where the Evergreens kept their captives? Why had they taken such pains to create an escape-proof prison area when all that they were supposedly after was the commercial profits that Passa would bring them? No answer to that one, Ron decided. He still knew too little about it.

And another thing: Lofty Patterson had been able to read from the Evergreens' drum talk that they were trying to appease their god or idol because they didn't have any more sacrifices for it. Here there must be altogether a thousand people and everybody in the chamber knew that the few victims that were taken out at half-hour intervals would quickly die on the altar of this insatiable deity. Weren't a thousand offerings like this enough for it? What kind of monster was it?

No answer for this one, either.

There was a third question which Ron had thought about already and found no answer for: how had the Evergreens discovered his small expedition so quickly? The soundless attack on Larry and especially the weird fight he himself had gotten into with Lofty, all of them waking up here in this giant cavern—it all pointed to the fact that somebody had been waiting for them and that they had merely bided their time for the most favourable moment in which to take them.

How could the Evergreens have managed this? And even if they weren't directly behind it, how had the Springers been able to contact them in this mountain fastness in the depths of the forest?

In the course of his inspection tour there was something else that Ron was forced to consider: the Springers must know that Terra would not stand still for this senseless murder of the settlers. Terra's consideration of the sensitivities of the natives had certain limitations and this murderous spell the Springers had woven around the god of the Evergreens was more than enough to exceed that limit. The Springers knew that sooner or later they'd be mixing it with the Terran Fleet and that their commercial war could turn into a shooting war. In which case the valuable world of Passa would be lost to them.

So how could they get involved in a thing like this? Why didn't they simply try one of their usual unscrupulous schemes, which for the most part would be far less bloody, and that way maybe channel off a portion of the Passa profits with much less risk?

Ron thought he might have the answer to this question. It was conspicuous enough to fill him with a new dread. The Springers had staged this whole affair with the intention of drawing Terra into a limited type of warfare. And if that was so it meant that they held some sort of trump card in their hands which led them to believe that they would win this conflict. What kind of a trump it might be was something Ron couldn't figure out.

But he realized that the situation was far more serious than he had believed it to be a few hours ago.

## 7/ THE CHAMBER OF DEATH

*We prepare a mighty feast for thee, O thou Incomparable One! Three princes of darkness shall we sacrifice to thee and we shall have thee with us always. Recognizing the faithfulness of thy children, thou wilt shield them from all danger, Ayaa-Oooy...!*

\* \* \* \*

For two long days they had tried to appeal to their fellow captives in an attempt to reawaken their spirit of self-preservation but the few who showed any kind of reaction at all merely asked to be left alone. They didn't want to be bothered. Ron's tour of inspection had yielded nothing. He had found the place where the Evergreens had disappeared with their victims but he hadn't tried to open the door. He knew it would be to no purpose.

Their life in the cavern was anything but diversified. About every hour and a half the Evergreens would come in to take three more men. Twice in a period of 20 hours a larger contingent of serpent monsters appeared to bring in a few tons of so-called food and water. The prisoners had lost their appetites and this kind of food was anything but tasty so they didn't touch much of it.

Naturally the cavern did not have any sanitation facilities so it wasn't too long before the air was so foul that even the sweet aroma of the Evergreens had no effect on it when they came in. Ron feared that the unsanitary enclosure would become a hotbed for infectious diseases and he tried to discuss the problem with some of the other prisoners but to them it was a matter of indifference whether they died on the altar of the monster god or succumbed to typhus.

Such was the situation when Ron perceived by his watch that by now almost 50 hours had passed since he had recovered consciousness here in the cavern. He was beginning to sense that the spell of apathy was also starting to take hold of him. Nor did he fail to notice that Larry and Lofty were falling into a similar mood. They hardly spoke to each other anymore. And why should they? There was no reason for it. And their faces reflected as much.

Ron finally realized that something had to happen if the monotony and hopelessness of their plight were not to drain them of their last spark of energy. And at last he reached the conclusion that it was better to attempt something that might be completely mad instead of lying around here staring at the ceiling and hypnotizing themselves into a state of mindless idiocy.

He developed a plan. In a word, it was deadly. But it was enough of a plan to convince Lofty and Larry to go along with it. There was an alternative to its purely suicidal aspects. At least it offered a choice: "Either us... or the Springers!"

\* \* \* \*

Ron checked his watch.

The Evergreens were not always punctual. Sometimes the one and a half-hour period was cut a few minutes early and sometimes it was a few minutes late. This time it seemed that their captors would be late but for those who waited it was agonizing in any case.

Ron tried to think of what else to say but nothing new came to his mind. He had already preached the usual precautions several times: keep your eyes open and don't let any opportunity escape you. That was it. He didn't have any more advice than that. He told himself that they would make it, forcing himself to shake off his morbid thoughts.

A slight vibration in the ground made him look up.

He looked directly at the wide, dimly lit opening in the cave wall as the three Evergreens came into the chamber with their arms outstretched. The lower pair of arms was for balance as they hopped along and the upper pair was for grasping their victims.

A cry went up in the cavern. Men jumped up and began to run. Ron also got to his feet and from the corner of his eye he could see that Larry and Lofty were also getting up. They all turned and also started to run.

Ron suddenly realized how difficult it was to only pretend to be fleeing. At first he found himself running for all he was worth but this meant that he'd soon overtake the rear line of the other fugitives and that wasn't a part of the plan. He forced himself to shorten his stride and go a bit slower while he looked

around toward the Evergreens. They had not increased their pace appreciably. They hopped along with their tails in the same rhythmic movement as usual. They knew that they'd get what they wanted without having to hurry.

Ron couldn't help hating them at the moment.

But he changed his course a bit to his right when he saw that no Evergreen was directly behind him. He took a second to look around for his two companions but all he could see was Larry. The latter was running directly ahead of an Evergreen with not more than a 15-foot lead. Ron saw him stumble and fall to the ground. In the next instant the serpent creature grabbed him and lifted him into the air.

But this was the whole idea. It was a simple ruse that would not arouse suspicion. Now Ron also forced himself to take a fall and he pretended to roll to one side as if to escape the serpent talons. It was actually a relief to him, however, when he saw the green-skinned arms reach down to him and he felt himself caught in their powerful grip. He started to yell and shout, also according to plan. And Larry promptly joined him. They strained their lungs and shouted even above the tumultuous clamour that filled the chamber. They flailed and struggled about just as they had seen the other victims do.

When Ron looked around for the third Evergreen he saw that he had loped along closer to the tail end of the fleeing crowd but that he had just now snatched up his prey. When the creature turned about to follow his companions, Ron saw that Lofty had also managed to get himself caught. The old-timer also set up a wild caterwauling to show he hadn't willingly joined this legion of the damned.

The Evergreens carried their human offerings out of the larger cavern. The howling of their captives had a different sound here in this dimly lit and narrower but loftier passage. The sound of their shouting was also somewhat broken up or absorbed by the bodies of the serpent throng that was stationed here to stand guard. Ron estimated their number to be about 200 at least. It was exactly what he had suspected. Lying in ambush here at the exit door they would have been able to thwart any attempt at an outbreak.

The Evergreens hopped along the corridor with their prey until they entered another chamber. While still shouting and struggling, Ron was able to observe the source of the dim illumination. There were smoking torches stuck in the walls. The Springers hadn't taken the trouble to equip this particular room with electric lights. The Evergreens had lighted the place by use of their ancient method, employing burning young branches of the glass trees. The chamber was circular and Ron noted that there were two dark exits at the other side of it.

It was at this moment that his captor bent down and set him on the ground. Ron reacted swiftly. He could well imagine what the other prisoners must have done when they were released here. He turned and attempted to run away. This time he sprinted with all his might and almost reached the high-ceilinged corridor before he was caught again, lifted into the air and re-deposited in the same place as before.

So now he stayed put. He also ceased his outcries, being curious about what was going to happen. The three Evergreens remained there and formed a kind of ring around the three Terran captives. After a few moments of standing there motionless, Larry played his part once more and made another run for it but he only got a few steps away before he was captured again.

Ron took his time in studying the three Evergreens. As long as their captives behaved themselves they also remained inactive. They stood there supported by their thin but powerful tails and if any of the numerous apertures in their spherical heads happened to be organs of sight then they were staring constantly in one direction, because the towering worm-heads did not move at all.

Minutes passed. Lofty started in with his yelling again. He waved his arms about and made as if to run away, whereupon the Evergreens became visibly more alert. He did everything that might have been expected of a desperate prisoner who feared for his life, all except for what he was shouting: "What the devil! How long do we stand around here? Why doesn't something happen?"

Ron gave him a brief shrug as his answer. How should he know that?

Nevertheless, Lofty's outcry appeared to have been some kind of cue because a few seconds later two more Evergreens emerged from the two dark openings. The scent of their skins was added to that of the serpents who were already present and the chamber was filled with such a heady perfume that it was almost anaesthetizing.

It was not at all clear at first what the two newcomers intended to do. In their upper arms they carried a bundle of material that seemed to be some kind of colourful cloth or fabric. Yet everybody knew that the Evergreens knew nothing of the art of weaving. They had nothing to do with fabrics.

Nevertheless, what they were carrying was some kind of cotton cloth. After they had deposited their burdens on the ground, Ron was surprised to note the shrieking colours and unstylish patterns which were unmistakably the product of some factory in the Arkonide Imperium. So obviously the Springers had furnished the material. And what did the Evergreens intend to do with it?

This question was quickly answered. A powerful talon grasped Ron by the shoulder and whirled him around. A second claw-hand grasped him more gently from behind. Then something rustled down over his head and obscured his vision for a second or two. When he could see again, he found that he was wearing a garish, tasteless gown with a ghastly print pattern. When he turned to look at his two companions he saw that they had not fared any better.

"Help!" cried Lofty despairingly. "What have they turned us into? How can we show our faces anywhere in this outfit?"

Only to ourselves, thought Ron bitterly. All of this might be very funny but who could doubt any longer that this was the Evergreens' ritual for preparing the sacrificial victims for their god?

\* \* \* \*

This time they were not carried from the chamber. They had to go their own way and the Evergreens intended that it was to be their last walk. The three monsters who had brought them here remained behind, ostensibly to discourage any attempt to escape.

Ron and his two companions moved ahead hesitantly as they might be expected to do. The passage they entered was tall and narrow in keeping with the serpent people's method of burrowing. And it became dark as soon as the torchlight from the other chamber faded from view. But the two Evergreens behind them pushed them along whenever they slowed their pace. They kept pushing the prisoners with their mighty arms until the Earthmen increased their speed.

However they weren't too rough about it and Ron was loath to admit it. In their present miserable plight they needed to be kept at a high pitch of anger. He had no intention of permitting himself to think at this

stage that the Evergreens were nice chaps after all and that they might be able to get along with them alright were it not for the Springers—or that these creatures were actually not to blame for this entire mess. Nor did it help to think about the Springers, either. They were not dealing with Springers here but with Evergreens. It was the Evergreens they had to escape from. Should they feel any sympathy for their serpent captors for just a second it might result in their death.

The passage seemed to be endless. The darkness did not make it any easier to judge the distance they had come. Ron was of the opinion that they had gone about one kilometre when they began to hear the strange sound for the first time. It seemed to come from the depths of the earth beneath them. At first it sounded like an odd bell tone that was not quite in a proper pitch. It was uncanny in that it produced an almost primordial sense of fear. They stopped but the Evergreens drove them onward. The strange sound became louder.

Ahead of them a reddish glow appeared. It seemed to emerge from a small opening far ahead in the darkness and as they approached it the sound they were hearing became more discernible. They finally realized that it was the same kind of clanging and ringing that they had heard before in the forest. Lofty began to cry out as though in terrible fear and maybe he wasn't pretending this time but Ron had expected to hear from him because he was the only one of them who could understand the drum talk.

"They say that joy has come to them," Lofty shouted, "for this great day when they bring to their god their most prized offerings. That means us without a doubt!"

Ron nodded mechanically as he narrowed his eyes and attempted to make out the source of the reddish illumination. When he saw that its brightness varied in a flickering fashion he became convinced that what he was seeing was torchlight—specially prepared torches that could produce colours.

Ron reviewed swiftly what he had seen since they had been carried out of the main cavern. Undoubtedly a ceremony of some kind awaited them up ahead but if they had any chance to get away then there were only two possibilities of an exit: the two passages that led from the circular chamber behind them. They had no idea where either of the tunnels led except that beyond their junction point there were hundreds of Evergreens who were waiting to block them.

Of course up there where the red light was coming from there could be still another way out but Ron preferred to be sure of his prospects ahead of time. He did not depend on things he didn't know anything about yet. Yet as the red light came nearer he had a peculiar hunch.

"Keep your eyes open!" he admonished his two friends again. "And if you don't see anything yourselves then keep an eye on me, OK?"

"OK," came their answer simultaneously.

It was the last normal interchange of words they would have for a long time. The passageway ended a few steps farther on. Before they got there Ron had perceived that it opened into a chamber that was also circular in shape but much larger than the one where they had been prepared for the sacrifice. However there was one feature here that was considerably different from what they had seen in any of the other rooms and passages: around the high walls just under the ceiling there were oval-shaped openings at regular intervals through which bright sunlight was streaming.

It flashed through Ron's mind that here might be the way to freedom. The oval openings were evidently large enough for a grown Terran to slip through them. Once they had climbed through one of those they would no longer have to worry about which passage or chamber contained the smallest ambush of

Evergreens. However, he soon rejected the idea. The holes were more than 25 feet off the floor. They would have had to climb onto an Evergreen's head first and make a wild jump for it to even reach one of them.

So that, too, was a hopeless prospect.

The source of the eerie red light turned out to be torches as he had surmised. There was a clear space in the centre of the cave but at least 500 Evergreens were crowded around it. Ron had expected to see spectators for the sacrifice but not such a surprising crowd as this.

In the central area were two hollow glass tree trunks which had been carefully mounted on fork-shaped supports. Before each of them sat an Evergreen armed with two beating sticks with which they struck the glass wood and produced the hollow monotonous booming sounds that the three men had been hearing for at least a quarter of an hour.

When the captives made their appearance at the passage exit, some of the Evergreens in the spectator throng rose up and drew back from the 'musicians' and the tone and cadence of the drumming changed at once. Visible now in the central area was a rectangular darkness on the floor that seemed to have been marked there with black charcoal. It lay there like a deeper shadow, ominously unreflective under the flickering red light of the torches, seeming to, draw one's gaze to it as if by magic. By the way the surrounding Evergreens were craning their serpentine necks and bending over it, they too seemed to be under its spell of attraction.

The serpent throng opened a passage to make way for the prisoners. Larry was in the lead and he hesitated but this caused the onlookers to raise a humming and whistling cry of protest and the three Evergreens behind the men pushed them ahead more vigorously than before. The captives came staggering into the centre of the chamber, still acting the role of unwilling victims. Actually Ron's curiosity was awakened by the dark rectangle on the floor and he wanted to have a closer look at it. But before he could get near enough to see it clearly one of his guards grasped him by his gown and jerked him back.

So the rectangle had special significance here—of that he was sure.

He started as a thunderous gong rang through the cavern. The nerve-racking music of the drum was silenced immediately. The humming and whistling sounds of Evergreen conversation also ceased. A deep silence pervaded the vast chamber after the reverberations of the gong had subsided. There was only an occasional rustling among the Evergreens, whose sweet-smelling hides filled the air with a heady scent of perfume.

Now that the peak moment of danger had come, Ron felt a change come over him which seemed to dissolve all his uncertainty and doubt. He stood there motionlessly within 10 feet of the black rectangle with all his senses keyed up to a high pitch of intensity. He was suddenly ready for anything.

Then all at once he perceived a cloud of smoke rising up ward which seemed to come from the rectangle although he saw no opening through which it might have emerged. At first it was just a thin blue haze and smelled like ordinary wood smoke but it quickly became thicker and less transparent. It reminded Ron of wood fires he had seen back on Earth and it seemed so out of place here that for a moment he wondered if it were some kind of mirage.

Then a dull booming sound was heard again. This time it really came from below somewhere. The black rectangle disappeared in the rising stream of thick, impenetrable smoke that fairly shot upward into the



chamber. The reverberations increased in volume, now mixed with shrill, howling notes.

Ron suddenly realized what was happening. All this was a means of staging the god's appearance! Like all false gods and idols it had to have its special way of materializing in order to strike fear into the hearts of the faithful and to fill them with awe.

And one more thing was evident. This was the moment for action. Now—while all attention was focussed on the ascending pillar of smoke and the unearthly sounds. Hardly anyone would be paying attention to the sacrificial victims!

Ron shouted above the tumult. "In we go, men!"

He had to rely on the other two to follow him. There was no time to worry about them now. He propelled himself forward and made a flying leap into the grey-blue column of smoke.

## 8/ THE MONSTER DEITY

*Transgressors are we, O Glorious One... forgive us! The Lord of Darkness has overwhelmed us and we have earned thy scorn... but yet forgive us, Ayaa-Oooy! Life long atonement do we offer thee in return for thy mercy, O thou Magnificent One...!*

\* \* \* \*

The choking fumes took, his breath away as he instinctively closed his eyes and took the plunge. He had stretched out his arms to take up the shock of hitting the floor but suddenly there was no floor. A deadly fear seized him as he realized he was falling!

But the paralysis of fright had hardly gripped him before his downward course was interrupted and he struck against a yielding obstacle. He had an impression of something vast and hairy. With a screeching and smacking sound the thing under him fled precipitately; he lost his balance and fell another short distance. But this time he felt the impact of solid footing under him.

Instinctively he rolled to one side. Above him he heard two loud thuds in close succession. The screeching and smacking sound repeated itself, this time in a tone of panic. Something hit the ground nearby, followed by another thud. There was a groaning and cursing somewhere next to him. Seconds later a loud clamour was heard overhead. The sound swelled to thunderous volume. He pulled himself farther to one side although he still held his eyes closed and did not see his surroundings.

Suddenly a man's voice yelled in abject terror. "Run for it! It's a monstrosity!"

Racing footsteps approached him and he was suddenly knocked aside as if struck by a cannonball. He crashed against the wall and opened his eyes as the pounding of running feet faded away in the distance.

To his surprise it was fairly bright around him. He recognized the shadowy outlines of Larry in his vicinity. The one who had cried out and run away was Lofty. To the right was a long corridor running under the floor of the upper chamber and Lofty had disappeared in that direction.

In front of him the grey fumes were still rising up out of the floor and escaping through a hole in the roof of the passageway. The hole above was rectangular in shape. Some of the smoke was drifting along the subterranean corridor so that his view was somewhat obscured in the direction where Lofty had had his frightening experience. Ron tried to see what was there but Larry stood in his way. As he shoved him to one side he felt that the other was trembling. Now he had a clear view of the back part of the passage and he could make out a shadowy form that began to move within the cloud of rising vapours.

His blood seemed to freeze in his veins. For a second or two he was also seized with an impulse to turn and run after Lofty as fast as he could go. Apparently stunned momentarily, the thing that was thrashing about in the pall of smoke was a monster that appeared to be about 10 feet high, massive and powerful, with its 4 arms braced against the walls for support. Its body seemed to be covered with fur and if one discounted the two extra arms the first impression it gave was that of a giant bear walking upright.

But that only lasted until its great head emerged from the fumes and the creature fixed them with its goggle-eyed stare. The skull was hairless, smooth-skinned and shiny. A giant thin-lipped mouth split the monster countenance in half. The spherical eyes were as big as two hands and seemed to stand out from under its bony forehead ridge as though ready to drop from their sockets at any moment. The head vaguely resembled that of a giant frog.

The appearance of the thing was both fascinating and hypnotizing. Up to this point Ron had been fairly convinced that the Springers must have brought along one of their combat robots and presented it to the Evergreens as their god. The Springer robots were of Arkonide manufacture and there were few things in the universe that could make a stronger impression on primitive people than a metal colossus that could walk and think by itself.

But this was far from being a robot! The frog-bear was an organic creature.

The uncanny beast came out of the smoke and walked toward the two Terrans, who were frozen where they stood with fear and horror. Apparently the thing had been in the process of climbing up through the smoke and clamour so that it could emerge out of the upper cavern's floor, thus demonstrating its supernatural powers to the Evergreens. But the three Terrans had plunged into the opening at that moment and had fallen on top of the false deity. This was what had broken their fall and prevented them from being injured by a direct drop to the stone floor of the passage. On the other hand, although the creature had withstood the impact of the first collision, namely with Ron, the succeeding blows had caused it to fall back. It had probably been stunned temporarily or even knocked unconscious for a moment or two. But now it had collected its strength again and it was on the alert for the ones who had spoiled its imposing entrance upon the stage of superstition.

It kept on coming toward them while its big feet made a slapping sound against the floor. Ron made a sign with his arm behind him to indicate to Larry that they should start a retreat. He himself kept stepping back in pace with the frog-bear monster's approach.

That is, until he saw the dully shining object lying on the floor between him and the creature. His eyes were drawn to it as if by magic and he suddenly wished he might jump forward and grasp it before the frog-bear could get its hands on it. It was a ponderous thing which looked very much like a giant sledgehammer and certainly it would weigh him down in flight. But it was the only piece of evidence that he could take with him out of this nightmare and that's why he simply had to have it.

Meanwhile Larry had given up trying to urge him to flee and he had gone. On the other hand, Ron remained where he was. He gauged the distance between himself and the monster for the last time—and then he made his leap. Simultaneously the alien creature let out a hissing and gurgling cry of anger. Ron concentrated only on the glittering, hammer-like object he was after; yet he could hear the slapping approach of the giant feet as the otherworld monstrosity increased its pace. It seemed that the frog-bear objected to anyone taking possession of the hammer.

Ron suddenly realized that the hammer was probably the instrument with which the god-thing killed its sacrificial victims. It was the sceptre of its divinity and no doubt the Evergreens would not recognize its supernatural station when it was not in its possession.

He finally grasped the hammer handle with both hands and lifted it. He raised up and was about to run when he saw that the frog-bear was looming over him with its multiple arms reaching out to crush him in a deadly grip. In desperation he swung the hammer. It was such a wide swing that the heavy sledge almost pulled him off his feet. It strained his muscles and tendons and he sensed a sharp pain in his shoulder but the hammer was moving forward now with irresistible force toward the creature. Ron closed his eyes. He heard a dull cracking sound as he felt the hammer strike against something and then the weird beast let out a shriek of pain. Ron heard its talons scratching as though in blind rage. He took a new grip on the hammer and then turned and ran... and ran... and ran...

The passage seemed to him to be endless. The hammer was heavy and if he had not been determined to show it to Nike Quinto as evidence he would have discarded it so that he could run faster. He did not look behind him but he could hear the slapping footsteps of the creature and he knew that in spite of its clumsy appearance it was gaining on him.

Just as he was wondering about Larry and Lofty he suddenly became aware of a different kind of light around him that was brighter and warmer. Fresh air blew in his face. There was a glittering shimmer on either side of him. He had come out of the passage and returned to the surface world. He was running through some kind of defile. To his right and left were bare slopes with a sparse growth of glassy shrubs here and there. From above the brilliant blue-white sun glared down. Its rays were broken up and reflected by the sloping banks of the defile, filling it with an unbearable shimmering heat.

Ron knew that he couldn't keep up the pace much longer. Behind him the sound of the monster feet was coming nearer and he didn't have to look around to know that his pursuer was not more than 30 feet or so away from him. He might have been able to scale one of steep inclines but the terrible thing on his heels could probably climb as well as he could. Moreover he could see the crowns of the glass trees above the slopes of the narrow canyon. Out there was the forest and he knew that he'd get no farther than 100 meters into it before the frog-bear would overtake him.

He could still reason enough to realize that he had to stop before all his strength was used up. At least he still had the heavy sledgehammer with which he had already taught the monster a little respect. He felt the heat of anger in him. He was not going to run anymore. He had a weapon in his hand, however primitive it might be. He had a compulsion to stand his ground like a man and face the inevitable.

His lungs were ready to burst. The heat had brought the sweat to his forehead and into his eyes where it smarted and blurred his vision. He came to a stop. He whirled around and raised the heavy hammer, ready to strike as soon as the beast was near enough.

And there it was, coming at him with its grinning frog face and its arms stretched out, ready to grasp its victim and crush him against his furry chest.

Suddenly a loud battle cry filled the air. Ron and the beast both looked around. Above on the right-hand top of the slope were Lofty and Larry. They were standing behind a barricade of boulders and were waving their arms. Ron couldn't make out what they were yelling at him but he saw them stoop down and cause the barricade to start moving. At first a single boulder came loose but the gap it produced started other stones rolling also. A pall of dust arose and finally an entire avalanche came roaring and thundering down the slope. Ron could see boulders bounding through the dust toward the bottom of the defile.

He knew what he had to do. He made a supreme effort to leap out of range and then he scrambled up the incline. He kept to the right of the tumbling avalanche but was still so close to it that he could feel the rising wind of its passage as a few smaller rocks shot close past his shoulder. But he got above it into the clear when he was about a third of the way up. The thundering of the debris into the ravine below was mixed with the tortured outcry of the alien creature as it failed to get out of the way in time.

Ron struggled onward until he stumbled over the top and fell to the level ground. He lay there panting against the heated rocks with the shining hammer still gripped in his hand, while he pumped the fresh air into his lungs. He was overcome by fatigue and relief simultaneously. He wanted to just lie there and go to sleep but he knew that the elimination of the frog-bear thing was far from bringing them a out of danger. They were still in enemy territory. The Springers were somewhere close by and they were not about to let the three Terrans discover their secret and get back to report it in the city without being challenged.

No, the battle would continue! There was no sense in just lying here.

He raised himself up. It was only now that he sensed what a toll had been taken from him by the events of the past few hours. His vision was blurred by spots and coloured rings in front of his eyes. However he was still able to recognize the figures of Larry and Lofty as they came toward him and he suddenly felt their hands pulling him up.

"We did it!" enthused Larry. "That fur-coated nightmare is under the rocks. You can see some of him sticking out of the pile from up here. The Evergreens are fresh out of gods so the spook game is ended. Lofty's already had a look around. He knows just about where we are. The glider is about two kilometres from here at the most."

Ron was still too exhausted and wrung out to collect his brains at the moment but he knew there might be a spark of hope. He caught on to what Larry was saying about the glider. The craft was of advanced design. Even the Springers might need a couple of days to figure out how it operated. They might have left it where they had found it until they could find time to learn how to start its engine and get it into the air again.

He pushed free of their supporting arms. Glord!—he thought. He had done some heavy running, to be sure, but he didn't have any business being this washed out. "Where did you say the glider was?" he asked.

"That way," said Lofty, pointing. "But sir—shouldn't you take a breather first? In the woods you'll have to have your wits about you or otherwise..."

He didn't finish the sentence but Ron knew what he meant. He hadn't forgotten the Passa beetles. But he also knew that there was no time to lose. The Springers were not the kind of opponents who were slow on the uptake.

"Not another second," he growled. "We start at once. Have to get out of here as quickly as possible."

So with Lofty in the lead they set out on their difficult path through the forest. They made good headway, in fact faster than they had previously been able to travel through the hostile thickets. Fear of the Springers was hounding them. They all knew that every minute counted.

It was then that Ron remembered what he had been trying to recall but had so far overlooked: it wouldn't do them any good to fight their way through to the glider for all it was, was a wreck by now.

They had forgotten that Larry had ruined the flier before the Evergreens took him captive!

## 9/ THE STOLEN THUNDERBOLT

*Thankful are we to thee, Almighty One, and we praise thy matchless grace. Thou hast seen the love of thy children and dost not condemn us for our sins. We shall honour and praise thy name for eternity, Ayaa-Oooy...!*

\* \* \* \*

"No, I don't have any idea how much is left of it," muttered Larry bitterly. "I wasn't in my right mind when I attacked the control panels and what happened after that is a complete blank."

They were crouched on the edge of the clearing that they had burned out with the thermos prior to landing here. About 30 feet away was the ship, which was apparently intact otherwise. They remained hidden in the glass thickets because they could not be sure whether or not the Springers had the place under surveillance. They stared at their 'skyhorse' as though they could guess from that distance whether or not it would respond to their know-how after they got on board,

They had arrived here but minutes before and Ron was already feeling the rising pressure of uneasiness. Every minute they wasted would narrow their chances of getting back to Modessa. Every minute that went by without being used would only increase the chances of the Springers to tighten their blockade around the region of the Midland Mountains.

Ron attempted to focus his mind exclusively on what lay ahead of them: the flight from the forest. While doing so he absently ran his fingers along the handle of the sledgehammer that he was determined to show Nike Quinto—if he ever got back to Terra. He was feeling certain protrusions on the handle without knowing it. With his mind completely absorbed in other matters, his senses failed for a moment to get through to him. His fingers touched the little buttons at least three times before he became aware of something unusual.

Wonderingly he lifted up the hammer and examined its handle. For the first time he noted the row of little

switch buttons and his curiosity was aroused. What could they mean? Now—all of a sudden he was seeing the frog-bear's situation in a new light. Working solo amongst the primitive serpent people, revered as a god, always ready to work new miracles—how had the beastly creature managed it? Without thinking much about it, Ron had presumed that the Springers had always been in the background, producing whatever effects had been necessary to build up the reputation of their imported god; but now this didn't seem to be quite so self-evident. Was this hammer perhaps the instrument by which the frog-bear had made his name so feared?

Gingerly, Ron pressed the lowest button on the handle. As he did so he held the hammer above him as a precaution. But in an instant he realized that he had underestimated the tool's capabilities. There was a roaring in his head; he felt the vibrations inside his brain and Larry and Lofty threw caution to the winds as they yelled out in sudden fright.

Hastily he pressed the same button again and the pain subsided immediately. In new amazement he reexamined the hammer suspiciously. However he was certain that he had just activated a powerful source of ultrasonic energy. Apparently it was this that had been used to bring the Evergreens into line whenever they did whatever was considered to be a transgression. There was little question about that part of it but the mystery that still remained was what effects might be unleashed by pressing the other buttons. Maybe the Springers had also figured that one day their frog-bear might be faced with a deadly situation and they may have fixed him up with a weapon that could kill automatically. As for instance, if he should activate the next button...?

Ron hesitated for some time. After considering the matter he realized that he didn't have any other choice. The hammer was the only weapon they had. They had to know how it functioned—otherwise they were sitting in a blind alley with nowhere to go.

He stood up and tried to imagine how the frog-bear might have held the hammer when he wanted to defend himself against an enemy. High overhead as though to strike a deadly blow? Hardly. That would make it too hard to aim. Or perhaps casually with his hand near the hammerhead as though he had no malicious intentions? That sounded more like it. It was much more probable that such a false god would have to strike suddenly and unexpectedly, rather than to advertise his animosity ahead of time.

Ron gripped the hammer close under its head so that the handle hung down at his side like a sword. In this position it was difficult for him to reach the buttons; for that purpose he had to twist his left arm around his back. But he remembered that the frog-bear creature was equipped with four arms not two. With either one of its, right hands it could no doubt reach the buttons easily.

Ron pressed the second button in the row, from the bottom, and was promptly knocked sideways, as a frightful force was unleashed from the hammerhead. A sharply focussed flame of blinding white energy shot steeply upwards and expended itself harmlessly in the air. He was aware that in his startlement he had again pressed the button and thus inactivated the weapon in time.

There could be no doubt about it now: among other things the hammer was a full-fledged thermo-beamer.

The third button turned on a disintegrator. The greenish beam of energy was able to dissolve the crystallizing forces of cohesion in physical substances and turn all matter in its path into a vapour. However, when the fourth button was activated, no visible effect was seen and Ron decided to keep this one well in mind. On the other hand the fifth button was obviously connected to a tiny antigrav generator. When he pressed it he felt a momentary lightness. A slight jump took him upward easily and when he wanted to come down he had to shove away from one of the glass branches above him.

Thus it was revealed how the frog-bear had managed to make its miraculous ascension through the opening into the hall of the sacrifice.

The sixth button again resulted in no visible effect. Which was an additional reason for caution. Ron decided that he wouldn't press it a second time as long as he wasn't sure what it was for.

It was enough to know that in this hammer they possessed a very effective weapon. He had no precise idea as to its range but as long as the Springers didn't attack them from a great height in their gliders and airships, it was sufficient to keep them out of danger while they sought to repair their own flyboat.

Of course all this time Lofty and Larry had been watching his demonstrations with the greatest of interest. His command, when it came, was therefore not unexpected.

"OK, let's go! We have to get that glider moving. It's three hours to sunset."

\* \* \* \*

Right from the start the situation looked promising. When Larry had gone into his rage and started to demolish the craft, it looked as though he had been shocked in time by an electrical short to prevent much serious damage. The equipment that had received the main brunt of his attack was an auxiliary panel which was used for flight stabilization and gyro alignment during emergency takeoffs. When necessary, Ron could fly the ship without this feature but Larry had also hit the main flight console to some extent and above all he had completely demolished both of the radio transmitters.

Larry and Ron got to work and since Lofty was no expert in this field he stood outside and kept his eyes open.

Shortly before sundown the repair work had advanced to the point where the glider could be started and under favourable circumstances it would be able to cover the distance to Modessa at low altitudes without much trouble. So far everything had been quiet, so Ron decided that they would take off at the present state of repairs, in order to increase their chances for escape.

He had just arrived at this conclusion when the drumming of the Evergreens started up out in the forest. The rumbling tones carried a note of tension; the reverberating pitch kept changing at least every three seconds or so while the volume swelled and ebbed at short intervals. Ron stopped his work to look outside toward Lofty Patterson, who was standing in the clearing and trying to understand the message of the drums. He suddenly turned and came running toward the glider. On his face was a look of bewilderment.

"They're giving thanks to their god!" he blurted out as he came panting up to the ship. "Because he has been gracious enough to forgive them for their sins. And all this time I thought we had knocked him off!"

At first Ron was no less surprised than Lofty. Had the frog-bear been able to work itself out from under the avalanche? That seemed an impossibility. Before the thing was buried all those boulders must have killed it.

But suddenly the solution came to him. He wondered that he had not thought of it sooner. The Springers had not been shortsighted enough to only bring one god along with them. In that case if anything happened to it they would lose their power over the Evergreens. They had a number of the frog-bear creatures with them so that if any one of them were to depart this life, another would spring into its place so that there would be no gaps in the Evergreens' induced state of awe.

He knew what this meant: they could no longer count on the serpent people being in a state of confusion whereby the Springers would have their hands full in controlling them. For the Springers, nothing had been disturbed. They had simply substituted another god and shrewdly caused it to reassure the Evergreens of its benevolence. So their hands were quite free to turn their attention to their most important opponents—these three Terrans out here in the glass forest wilderness with their half-wrecked glider.

Ron reached his hand down to Lofty. "On board with you!" he yelled. "We're taking off at once!"

\* \* \* \*

Slowly and laboriously the flier lifted up over the glass forest. The blue sun had lowered behind the trees a few moments before but now it came into view again.

At the flight controls, Ron swept his gaze right and left and up and down the indicator panels, constantly on the alert for any warning signals affecting the operation of the various systems on board. But the power and liftoff systems functioned smoothly, the small antigravs helped boost the ship vertically into the air and the nav-jets furnished their calculated thrust when he cut in the horizontal propulsion units.

Ron was satisfied. He breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was working out better than he expected. He was about to turn to his companions and give them a few words of encouragement when he heard a sudden shout from Larry.

"Look out! Enemy craft off to the right!"

Ron jerked around. Partially to his right the sun was lowering behind the horizon. The enemy had chosen the most favourable approach angle for the attack. Against the glaring brightness the ship was only discernible as a small, semitransparent shadow.

Ron forced himself to be calm. He did not change his course. The glider moved steadily westward over to the roof of the forest. It was going as fast as its propulsion system was capable of at the moment. "So let him come," Ron advised. "He doesn't know we're armed. Maybe he just wants to play around a little at first, to check us out."

His supposition turned out to be correct. The alien craft, which was also a glider, came toward them at a superior speed and circled them a couple of times. Through the other cockpit windows Ron could make out the powerful broad-shouldered shapes of two Springers. This was the first time on Passa that they had shown their teeth. Now they made no secret of the fact that they were the authors of the unrest here on the planet. Ron smiled bitterly when he realized that they were also showing themselves at the moment because they considered this Terran flier and its passengers to be helpless victims who couldn't escape them anyway.



He heard a growl from Larry: "I've got them right in my sights, Ron. If I fire they'll have a beautiful doughnut hole in their hull."

Ron shook his head. "Not yet, Larry. If we shoot them down here, in a few minutes we'll have an armada on our heads."

Ron kept on westward toward the mountains. He knew that the greatest peril still lay ahead because if the Springer spaceships had not taken off already they were lying hidden in the canyons of the Midland Mountains. And he assumed that this fact had also contributed to the apparent carelessness of the Springer glider.

The mountain slopes rose higher. The twilight hour of reddish-brown light began as the disc of the blue sun went under the horizon and the eastern sky tamed a dull rose hue. The enemy craft had not yet changed its tactics. It flew around the Terran glider tirelessly and whenever its occupants could be seen it was obvious that they were grinning broadly.

Ron had been flying close to one of the towering cliffs and when he was within 100 meters of the mountain wall he changed his course, taking a right angle toward the South—but simultaneously he kept a close eye on the enemy ship. It did not escape him that the Springers seemed to become nervous. They narrowed their circling course but stayed with them.

They're getting edgy, Ron thought to himself with a grin of amusement. Apparently he wasn't going in the direction they preferred. Therefore he could assume that their main outfit was camped somewhere to the North.

Now the Springers began to show their hostility. Evidently they felt little compunction about destroying the Terran glider and its occupants. They fired a shot from a thermocannon, which laid a hissing white beam across the glider's bow, although still at a fairly safe distance. Ron cut off the jets and the antigravs kept them drifting steadily above the trees on the steeply rising slope of the mountain.

"Now get ready, Larry!" said Ron evenly.

The Springers had interpreted the manoeuvre as he wanted them to and they assumed that the Terrans were now ready to surrender. They came closer, not too fast, in fact with a hint of hesitation; yet Ron could see the threatening muzzles of their ship's guns.

He heard Larry stirring behind him and he admonished him hastily: "Hold it! Hold it! Let them keep coming! You'll hit them at 5 meters more surely than at 20."

Larry grumbled audibly but allowed the enemy to come nearer. One of the Springers had opened the other ship's manlock part way. The upper portion of his body was visible as he leaned out and waved an arm at them energetically. Ron understood: since there was no radio communication he wanted to tell them to go in another direction. But he held the glider where it was, making it appear that he did not comprehend.

The Springer craft kept on coming, intending to close the gap entirely. But as the other machine's sharp bow was just about to touch their hull, Larry Randall acted. A blinding, sunbright beam shot forth from the head of the sledgehammer. The still air above the forest was shaken by a hard, sharp explosion. In the core of the painfully brilliant fireball something was being blown to shreds. Glowing and burning fragments spewed out in all directions.

When Larry shut off his strange weapon and readjusted his eyes to the normal light, all there was left to see was a descending contrail of smoke—and finally there was a ragged black hole in the glassy shimmer of trees below.

Ron shook off the morbidity of his thoughts and turned on the propulsion again. An hour later the glider had put the mountains behind it and was on a safe course westward toward the city of Modessa.

\* \* \* \*

Nike Quinto spoke more sternly than usual when he indicated the unpretentious and somewhat frightened figure of Lofty Patterson, who sat in his office with Ron and Larry. "Of course you must understand that your friend here will have to undergo a bit of memory treatment as soon as this affair has been settled. You can't just bring a complete stranger into the Division and expect us to let him run loose without a bit of shearing, can you?"

Ron Landry smiled. He had anticipated this and was prepared with a powerful counter-argument. "Sir—at the risk of raising your blood pressure—I would suggest that the Division ought to assign this man to a permanent post on Passa as its representative. There is no one who knows that planet as well as he does."

Nike Quinto raised up out of his chair. His voice became shrill. "You're right about the blood pressure, I'll have to grant you that! Since when are you the one to pick out members for the Division? Do you think maybe I'm too old or too stupid? No, my lad, in that you are mistaken!" His chubby body sank back again into the chair. In a calmer tone he then added: "Alright, so we'll give the matter some thought—but first there are more important things to decide."

Ron sighed with relief. He noted that Larry glanced at him with an amused smirk on his face. It was as good as in the bag. Lofty Patterson would become a permanent representative of Intercosmic Social Welfare and Development, Division 3, on Passa. In exchange for keeping his eyes open on his own home ground he would receive a respectable income for the rest of his life. In the opinion of Ron and Larry, the old-timer had more than earned it.

"Now about your report," said Quinto in a businesslike tone. "It's been analysed from all angles. The conclusions may surprise you. First: your guess that the Springers are ready for a local war over Passa has been confirmed, Maj. Landry. All signs point to it. So the Springers must have a new kind of weapon which they hope will help them win. Just what that weapon may be we're not able to conjecture as yet.

"Second: the fact that the Evergreens started out by leaving the murdered settlers lying where they fell and then in the second stage of their uprising carried them away as an offering to their god seems to indicate to the experts that the Springers weren't quite clear as to their plan of action in the beginning. For some reason or another, after a few days they suddenly found it essential to obtain the corpses along with the living.

"Third: the sledgehammer device has been examined. We know now what happens with buttons 4 and 6. Number 4 has to do with a neural shock impulse. It's released in two actions simultaneously: by pressing the button while swinging the hammer at the same time—and only in that combination. . . ." Nike

Quinto paused briefly while watching his listeners carefully. "Does that tell you anything?"

Ron had an idea. "That would indicate that the god-creature didn't kill his victims at all. He could swing the hammer and make the Evergreens think the sacrificial victims were killed by it—when actually they weren't..."

Quinto nodded approvingly. "Exactly, So we don't have to fear that very many of the vanished Terrans actually were murdered. For reasons unknown the Springers prefer to take them alive. And now, point 4: button #6 activates a highly unusual instrument. Basically what it is, is a transmitter with an amazingly weak output. So it can't be picked up at any great distance unless it works on a directional beam principle. And they saw to that they used a planned position mask-like a location photo stencil—and the beam works automatically. As long as the transmitter is within the area covered by the photo mask, it beams into a specific receiver zone. According to the experts that zone represents the hidden base of the Springers."

He looked at his listeners again and was satisfied that his explanation had made the proper impact. Ron had leaned forward tensely in his chair while Larry and Lofty sat there with dumbfounded expressions on their faces.

Quinto continued leisurely. "Of course that means the end for that particular base. At a given time we'll send a commando force to Passa, equipped with this transmitter, and they'll roust the enemy out of there. But now there's something more important. We come to this frog-bear creature you have described. Such an animal isn't known to this galaxy. In fact: our experts are of the opinion that such a creature could not have evolved naturally. Too many contradictory factors. So they're convinced that although the thing is a living animal of some sort, it must be a product of the test tube." This time he wasn't inclined to let anybody jump to conclusions and he continued hastily.

"That gives us an obvious clue, gentlemen. There is only one race in the galaxy that can produce a synthetic creature like that on such short notice and with such precision: the Aras, a branch of the Arkonides who have unscrupulously dedicated their lives to scientific research. This isn't the first time that they've made a side deal like this with the Springers, where the Springers profit from the business end and the Aras get paid for their science. Therefore we can assume that Passa is not only worth striving for to the Springers—the Aras are out to get it as well. The cooperation of the two races would seem to explain the initial confusion in the plan of action but it makes our own approach to the problem more difficult. The Aras are formidable opponents for the very reason that they stay out of armed conflicts when they can. In stead, they prefer to have the products of their bio-medicines do their work for them."

Nike Quinto allowed time for his words to take effect. He noticed that Ron Landry was staring at the floor, lost in thought. Larry Randall was sitting far back in his chair with his eyes half closed. Lofty Patterson was sitting up straight and looking at Quinto but Nike had the feeling that he wasn't actually seeing him.

"There's another question," Quinto finally began again, "which hasn't been answered so far. How were the Springers able to force their god on the Evergreens so quickly and thoroughly? I mean, it might be easy to go to a primitive people and set up any well-functioning robot in front of their noses and sell them the idea that it's a god or something like that. But I'm not so sure that such primitives would go all out on that basis alone—I mean they wouldn't be as devoted and have such unshakable faith as the Evergreens have demonstrated for the frog-bear god. I'm thinking there's still some kind of secret hidden behind all this and I'd be inclined to..."

Lofty broke in for the first time "I can probably explain that, sir. It so happens that in my earlier days I

had as many dealings with the Evergreens as anybody around. They don't have any actual literature of their own. They have no written language. But there's a kind of richness of legend that they pass on by word of mouth, you might say. One of those legends tells of a powerful god who would come down from Heaven one day and become the protector and champion of the Evergreens. This god is described as a mighty being with 4 arms and is supposed to be capable of performing a whole string of unheard of miracles."

Nike Quinto nodded as though he had expected such an explanation, "All of which fits the frog-bear very well," he answered. "He certainly didn't disappoint them in the miracle department but... since the Evergreens are 18 to 20 feet tall would they be ready to think of a creature as mighty when it's only 10 feet high?"

No one could provide an answer to this question. Ron had thought about this, himself, and it had occurred to him that here was a flaw in the enemy's planning.

"We shall be able to turn that fact to our advantage," Quinto declared suddenly. He stood up as though to indicate that he considered the conference to be at an end. "The final preparations will be given top priority. Gentlemen, you are on standby notice. Most likely by day after tomorrow you will be taking off again—equipped with everything you will need in order to put an end to this mischief on Passa."

He said no more than this. Ron had a suspicion that he was keeping a not inconsiderable secret all to himself and that he was amusing himself at their expense—gloating over how they might be racking their brains in the meantime while trying to figure it out.

## 10/ TRI-LIGHT OF THE GODS

*Despair is upon our hearts, thou Mighty Ones! We thy miserable servants have not expected two gods to come among us. Dispel our doubt and despair, O Glorious Ones! It lies alone within thy powers to decide and we shall serve the mightier of thee always!*

\* \* \* \*

A monster stamped through the red gloom of the glass forest.

It was 25 feet tall and covered with shaggy hair. With its 6 great arms it ripped the undergrowth out of its way. With a rumbling bellow the monster knocked down any glass trees that offered him any resistance and his thunderous cries rang out for miles through the forested wilderness.

A clamour of Evergreen drumming started up everywhere to appease the bestial entity. And a miracle happened: the giant creature understood the drum talk and spared the communities of those who paid him homage. But as for those others who remained true to the god whose temple they were even now building beyond the Midland Mountains, their villages were ruthlessly flattened and with a strength that

could only be supernatural.

Tidings of the new god spread through the land. Did not the smaller god of the mountains reveal his inferiority when he failed to react to the misery of his subjects? How could they know who the true deity was, even though the new Colossus announced in a thundering voice that he was the genuine Ayaa-Oooy—when he proclaimed that the one they were building their temple for was only a minor entity and although the impostor was far too small for the deception he was nevertheless trying to take advantage of his similarity of appearance?

Whom should they believe? Of course the smaller god raised his voice also behind the mountains when he learned about the invader. But his voice was far less powerful by comparison. His words only carried a short distance through the fastness of the forest. Also, what he said was incomprehensible.

Thus enmeshed in an agonizing conflict of conscience the unfortunate children of the double star finally left it up to the gods themselves to settle the issue of who was the true divinity. However this course did not seem to be agreeable to the lesser god behind the mountains. He attempted to appeal to those who were closest to him and to goad them into marching against the new monster and destroying him. In fact he even managed to assemble a group of humans from somewhere. These latter had climbed over the mountains and set out to lay a trap for the greater god. But the new deity had sprayed out a lightning of death from his eyes and hands and destroyed them. It happened faster than it would take a strong serpent to make even two jumps with his tail. After that no more people appeared to fight for the lesser god.

The giant god had come from the Northwest and in a day and a half he reached the foot of the mountains. Fearful Evergreens watched from a distance while he traversed the steep slopes without diminishing his pace. They marvelled at his great size and strength and were almost convinced that he was the true god instead of the lesser deity over there on the other side of the mountain.

Little did he know that Capt. Larry Randall sat in the bowels of the monster at this moment, where he was loading a new tape into the tape player. He turned on the machine and a few seconds later the loudspeakers above him in the great frog mouth began to blare out a new message. It was under tremendous amplification. The monster-beast appeared to be crying out across the land to the Evergreens and he spoke in their own language.

Larry shook his head somewhat sullenly. "It may be working like a charm," he muttered, "but this whole game is still a bunch of childish nonsense."

\* \* \* \*

Ron Landry was stationed just below the head of the robot-beast. From that higher vantage point he was able to control the monster's movements as well as the output of the powerful fusion engine, which was beneath him in the 'lung' compartment. He was enclosed in a soundproofed cabin because otherwise the great god's thunderous voice would have been too much for him to endure.

And finally, way below in one of the mighty legs of the creature, Lofty Patterson crouched beside a special listening device. There he was able to pick up the drum talk of the Evergreens and whenever he heard something of importance he would report it to Ron Landry over the intercom system.

By 15:00 'ship' time on the 21st of October 2102, the huge god-figure had put the Midland Mountains behind him without any further molestation. And thereby he had already accomplished the major part of his task. For he had not only come to Passa to convert the Evergreens but also to divert the attention of the Springers and Aras to himself as he crashed thunderously through the glass forest. This was to permit Maj. Bushnell and his commando unit to proceed all the more inconspicuously toward the place where the secret base of the enemy was located—according to signals from the automatic beam transmitter that Ron had provided them with.

The tactical plan provided that by 15:30 Terra time Bushnell's 200-man force should have the enemy base so well surrounded that the Springers wouldn't be able to budge. Because probably even the giant god-robot would have had a rough time of it if at the temple site he not only tangled with the smaller false god but also got into a hassle with the well-armed Springer patrol.

The critical time arrived without anything happening, however. A short, coded radio message was received from Maj. Bushnell, which reported that he had been able to adhere to the plan. The Springers still did not know that they had been hemmed in. This they would find out if they attempted to come to the aid of their besieged godling below at the temple. Bushnell also reported, as expected, that he had discovered two medium-sized Springer spaceships at the base.

But the titanic god-figure continued stamping onward toward the Caves of East Midland, as they had been dubbed in the meantime, with its eyes spewing forth lightning and its mighty voice still thundering out its messages to all the land. It only became silent when Ron in his neck compartment received an agonized request from Lofty down in the leg section.

"The drums are going again! For Glord's sake shut off that loudmouth up there so's I can understand what they're saying!"

\* \* \* \*

Shortly before the blue sun went down the giant god reached the place where the Evergreens had started to erect a temple to their deity, Ayaa-Oooy. They had cleared a part of the forest and had put up a stockade wall using the tall glass trunks of the trees. They had gotten no farther than this before news of the mightier god had shaken the land.

From his point of vantage in the neck of the Behemoth, Ron Landry could see the area clearly. The walled clearing lay peacefully below him in the light of the lowering sun. There was not a sign of the Aras' synthetic creature and evidently the Evergreens had long since slunk away into hiding.

Ron brought the monster to a halt. It towered over the clearing and cast a mighty shadow as it turned its head as though searching the area. The blasting voice broadcast its challenge: "Where is this false god? Let him come out and show me what he can do! Then I will decide if mercy is to be shown!"

Ron had a sense of uneasiness behind the soundproof walls of his cubicle as he heard the muffled rumbling of the tape recorder's amplified output. These lofty utterances of the ersatz god had been pronounced back on Earth and each tape strip had been carefully labelled. But under present conditions they couldn't understand what the great voice was thundering out, not even Lofty. Ron wondered what

would happen if Larry accidentally used the wrong tape and had the god blurt out something that didn't fit the situation at all. Ron had thought it would have been better to wait until a translator machine could be converted for direct use, allowing one of them to speak directly through it and the amplifying system. In that way there would be no chance of making a goof. But Nike Quinto had been cutting corners to save time and he was still the boss.

Ron was determined to put an end to this obnoxious game of superstitious folderol. He activated the super-god again and had it march toward the temple wall while it was still bellowing out its challenge, exhorting the impostor to give an account of himself. This wall was no particular obstacle. The monster crashed against it the first time and it cracked. The glass logs leaned sideways or fell to the ground. Under the impact of a second assault the entire wall came thundering down. A great pall of dust arose from the dry earth and in its midst any chance observer might have seen the shaggy, frog-faced beast angrily trampling the remains of the structure into ruins.

It made an impressive scene. Thundering maledictions, the synthetic monstrosity raged about, guided by the three humans inside, and trampled the ruins of a sanctuary which had been under preparation for worshipping another synthetic creation. But Ron paid little attention to the scene of the destruction; he was more interested in the rim of the forest and finally he detected a shadowy movement at the northern edge of the clearing.

His range of sight was not limited to the movements of the giant frog-head. While the robot monster swayed its head here and there, he was still able to concentrate entirely on the suspicious area of the woods that had caught his attention. In the shimmering light shadows between the glass trees he could make out two very tall, thin humanoid figures. They were busy setting up several pieces of equipment which had the appearance of old-fashioned cannons. Or at least that's what the stocky, squat tubes seemed to be that protruded from the underbrush into the clearing. But Ron was more interested in the operators than in the equipment. He could only catch brief glimpses of them but it was enough to convince him that these two were Aras—members of the race of Galactic Medicos, as they were called. So now they were coming into the fray themselves to defend their test tube Messiah.

Ron caused one of the monster arms to raise up toward them and he took careful aim. The two Aras seemed to have finished their preparations and now they huddled down behind their weapons but Ron's blinding, hissing thermo shot struck straight between them. The air in the impact area was only heated for the fraction of a second but the intensity was enough to make it expand like an explosion. He saw the long thin figures fly into the air and hurtle to either side of their bivouac where they lay motionless on the ground. One of the cannon devices whirled right up into the branches overhead and then crashed to the earth again. The strange weapons were capsized and for a second Ron thought he saw a greenish thread of smoke come out of their muzzles. But he disregarded them and made the frog-bear giant press into the forest on the trail of the Aras, in a search for where they had come from.

Within a few minutes he reached another clearing which was smaller. At his first glance he recognized the loose mound of earth on the farther side of the place and the dark hole that yawned in the middle of the earth pile. For just a fraction of a second he saw a glint of reflection from shaggy fur but immediately it disappeared. It was all he needed so he fired a second time. In the same instant an enraged cry of pain rang out in the forest.

The smaller god scurried out of its hiding place and stood ready for battle. Its furry hide revealed a black burned spot where the giant bear's fire beam had grazed it and the creature stood there uncertainly on its two hind legs. However it swung its hammer and unleashed its lightning.

Ron didn't hesitate for long. He swung the great god's arm until it pointed directly at the smaller beast's

midsection. Then he fired and saw the heavy bolt of energy tear the smaller god asunder.

The way into the ground was clear. The tunnel was not so large that it could be negotiated easily by the larger monster. However, the mechanical creation was equipped with many flexible joints. It could bend down low and with brilliant searchlights beaming out of its giant eyes it was able to illuminate the dark passage.

The shaft led steeply into the depths. The Evergreens had been using it for the purposes of serving their false god so it was high enough so that the new god could move through it without too much trouble. Farther below burned a feeble red light which could be seen when the giant eyes shut off their blinding light. The huge figure marched downward toward the other flickering light source.

At this time Ron Landry picked up a message from Maj. Bushnell: "Everything is secured! We have captured the base. 130 Springers have been captured. They surrendered without a struggle when they realized what they were up against—and we've got their ships under control."

Then Ron accelerated the pace of the giant because he knew now that the only opponents left were the Aras. The red torchlight burned in front of a large door that had been fashioned out of shimmering wood from the glass forest. The monster god shattered it with a single thundering kick. Beyond it a larger chamber widened out which was filled with a greenish glowing gas. The Colossus paid no attention to this and pressed onward into a farther passage. But here the way was suddenly blocked by brilliant lightning and the towering figure received such a powerful blow that it was almost catapulted back into the cavern. But in the next instant it hurled its own lightning, which went hissing through the passageway. There was a sound of wild, painful howling which soon faded away. The false beast moved onward and finally discovered its victims lying on the ground. Here were the bodies of three additional godlings which had been the final reserve supply of the Aras' bio-creations. Here also were the dead bodies of four Aras who had been forced to take up their final stand here, although they could just as well have come out into the open.

This appeared to be the last obstacle to be confronted. The passage ended in front of another plank door and when he shattered it with another mighty kick Ron finally saw what he was looking for: a giant, lighted cavern where thousands of humans lay apathetically on the floor, awaiting their ghastly fate. And this was worse than being offered up to a false god. They had passed through that experience and now they would have been taken to the dissecting tables of the Aras if they had not been rescued at the last moment.

The towering god-figure spoke to them in its thundering voice, but this time in human language: "You are free, Terrans! Get onto your feet and get out of here! The false god is dead!"

\* \* \* \*

Nike Quinto rubbed his hands. Nobody had ever seen him in such a good mood. "So everything's been taken care of to our satisfaction, right?" he said, fairly chuckling in his success. "By comparison to what we had feared at first, the price tag has been fairly small. The Evergreen uprising cost us the lives of 315 Terrans, all told. Of those, 302 were killed by the Evergreens and 13 died in the Ara experiments. Incidentally, does anybody know what they were trying to do?"



Ron Landry shook his head. "No sir. In any case they were trying to launch a major experiment of some kind. They had used the false god situation to collect 10,000 Terrans for it."

Nike Quinto nodded. "You're right so far. OK, that's fine. We've located their subterranean laboratory and captured two remaining Aras. If we put them through the wringer right they'll probably be willing enough to tell us the truth about it all. At any rate the super-god we sent to the Evergreens seems to have straightened them out. They'll never again buy the sales pitch from any impostor that the road to salvation is to fight against the Terrans."

Ron Landry smiled. He glanced at Larry and Lofty, who were sitting next to him, and then he turned back to Nike Quinto. "To be frank with you, sir, we didn't hold out much hope for the success of your... ah... somewhat wild idea. We'd like to compliment you on your foresight and planning, which apparently worked out better than we thought it would."

Quinto's face reddened. He swallowed hard as if he found it hard to speak. "What are you trying to do now—build up my blood pressure again? Wild idea, indeed! If any blonk on an undeveloped world takes a small jalopy for a god, then logically he's going to think a truck is a greater god. That's all the brains it takes. As for any deeper perception or foresight—bunk! But naturally I can see farther ahead than you can. Otherwise you'd be a colonel sitting here and I'd be a mere major sitting where you are! So lay off the wisecracks because I can already feel my blood roaring." He groaned and put a hand to his heart. "One of these days you'll put me in my grave, Landry, and you too, Randall. Not to mention our new man for the Passa post. Yes, I mean you! Don't give me such a dumb look or I might regret I made the assignment!"

Lofty shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He wasn't yet accustomed to take Quinto's bantering the way it was supposed to be taken.

"So what happens to the Springers?" asked Ron, attempting to change the subject.

"What do you mean?" snapped Quinto critically. "They'll be given a regular court trial, same as the two Aras we captured. I don't doubt that they'll give the scarbs at least 20 years hard labour. We're going to make sure the verdict and sentence will be advertised throughout the galaxy. Maybe then the Springers will think twice before they ever try such a stunt again."

Still pondering, Ron asked another question. "But they must have been playing for heavy stakes in this operation, wouldn't you say? Otherwise they wouldn't have gone all out like they did."

Nike Quinto had regained his composure by now and he smiled easily. "Oh yes, I believe you could say that. And it wasn't just one goal they had in mind. Of course from the start of the whole thing they were just concerned with getting hold of the Passa pelt business. But in figuring out how best to go about it they pulled the Aras into the situation, offering them a slice of the pie. Probably the Aras promised to help them under the condition that the Passa affair could be used to further their researches... for example, 10,000 Terrans for guinea pigs.

"Then they landed a mixed patrol on Passa and had a look around. It was then also that they may have discovered what the Evergreen skins were really good for and suddenly the Ara-Springer deal took on a new aspect. After that they were willing to go all out for the business itself and if necessary they were prepared to wage a local war on the planet. Because as soon as they got hold of the first dozen serpent skins they would have a unique weapon for which there was no counter-defence in the galaxy... at least not at that time."

Ron perked up his ears. "Serpent skins—a weapon?" he asked, bewildered.

Quinto nodded calmly. "I thought maybe you'd come to that conclusion a bit sooner," he said.

Then he pulled out a drawer of his desk and took out a glass ampoule. He held it up against the light and Ron could see that it was filled with a greenish iridescent gas. The colour of the gas reminded him of something but for the moment he didn't know what it was.

"Our scientists call this stuff avertidin. They know the effect it has on the human nervous system. The Aras blew it into the underground areas that you two investigated with Patterson. They were also able to pass it through the glider's defence screen when Capt. Randall was standing watch there. The gas is terrifically active. It can diffuse itself through a screen with unbelievable speed. Anybody breathing it is gripped by an irresistible rage. He runs amuck against anything or anybody that's handy. This was probably the riddle the Aras were trying to solve on Passa. They wanted to find out how to control the effects of the gas so that it would cause rage and anger to be directed at specific people or objects. That's what we think they were after, anyway. We'll know the answer after we've questioned the Aras and taken a closer look at their laboratory on Passa."

Quinto looked thoughtfully at Ron. "But in this regard the Aras were faster than our own scientists," he continued. "They got wind of the possibilities even during the first native uprising." He swung the ampoule back and forth. "At any rate, this sample here was produced in our own labs."

Ron Landry suddenly paled. "Glord!" he stammered. "If..."

"If your super-god had not been hermetically sealed, you were about to say?" smiled Quinto. "Yes, my dear fellow, in that case you might have blown your cork right there in your cubicles. As I gather, the Aras had filled the entire approach passage with the gas."

Ron shook his head hastily. "I don't mean that, sir," he blurted out. "But the prisoners... the 10,000 of them that we found in the main cavern... if they hadn't been too weak to get up immediately and run out of there, the gas vapours would have still been in the passage when they came through. There would have been a massacre!"

Nike Quinto nodded, this time quite seriously. "Yes, that's right. The fact it didn't happen is due to no action on our part. But nevertheless, you know, here in Division 3 we have to count luck as one of our allies, my lad." He stood up while lifting the ampoule up to the light for the last time. "And by the way, I forgot to tell you something," he said. "The most vital ingredient of avertidin is extracted from the Passa pelts. That's why all the commotion."

\* \* \* \*

But the giant god had been immobilized by now and was on its way home to Terra. The living idol had taught the Passan aborigines respect for Terrans and that was all it'd been intended for. Its task was at an end.

In the tri-coloured twilight hour the drums of the Evergreens were ringing through the fastness of the glass forest and the serpent people were chanting:

*Praised be thy name forever, O thou Almighty One! Eternally grateful are thy children whom thou hast protected against the greatest of evils and whom thou hast saved from the false god. We serve thee always, O thou Just, O thou Ayaa-Oooy...!*

## **ORDER OF THE ACTION**

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10/ TRI-LIGHT OF THE GODS

THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

THE IDOL FROM PASSA

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THE SHIP OF THINGS TO COME

ATLAN TELLS US:

Before I could ponder the pros and cons of the new situation the Akon ship was gripped by a terrible force.

Before my eyes the others in the room began to blur.

My vision was obliterated in a burst of crimson pyrotechnics.

And then there was nothing.

My last thought was that this was the most violent dematerialisation I had ever experienced. The Akon Central Station transmitter must have generated an incredible burst of power to be able to dematerialise the considerable mass of the spaceship and take it over in the form of extra-dimensional pulses.

\* \* \* \*

YOUR pulses will race as you enter—

THE BLUE SYSTEM

By

K.-H. Scheer