

Ye Who Would Sing

By Alan Dean Foster

Caitland didn't hate the storm anymore than he had the man he'd just killed, but he was less indifferent to it. It wouldn't have mattered, except that his victim had been armed. Not well enough to save himself, but sufficiently to make things awkward for Caitland.

Even so, the damaged fanship could easily have made it back to the Vaanland outpost, had not the freakish thunderstorm abruptly congealed from a clear blue sky. It was driving him relentlessly northward, away from one of the few chicken scratches of civilization man had made on this world.

If adrenalin and muscle power could have turned the craft, Caitland would have done better than anyone. But every time it seemed he'd succeeded in wrenching the fan around to a proper course, a fresh gust would leap from the nearest thunderhead and toss the tiny vehicle ass over rotor.

He glanced upward through the rain-smear'd plex-idome. Only different shades of blackness differentiated the sky above. If the Styx was overhead, what lay below?—granite talons and claws of gneiss, the empty-wild peaks of the Silver Spar Range. He'd been blown further north than he'd thought.

Time and again the winds sought to hammer the fan into the ground. Time and again he somehow managed to coax enough from the weakening engine to avoid the next ledge, the next crag, the next cliff.

He could not get above the ice-scoured spires; soon he was fighting just to stay in the air, the fanship dancing through the glacier valleys like a leaf running rapids. The weather was playing a wailing game with his life, but he was almost too tired to care. The fuel gauge hovered near empty. He'd stalled the inevitable, hoping for even a slight break in the storm, hoping for a minute's chance at a controlled landing. It seemed even that was to be denied him.

The elements had grown progressively more inimical. Lightning lit the surrounding mountains in rapid-fire surreal flashes, sounded in the thin-shelled ship cabin like a million kilos of frying bacon. Adhesive rain defeated the best efforts of the wipers to keep the front port clear. Navigation instrumentation told him that he was surrounded by sheer rock walls on all sides. As the canyon he'd worked his way into narrowed still further, updrafts became downdrafts, downdrafts became sidedrafts, and sidedrafts became aeolian aberrations without names. Mobiusdrafts.

If he didn't set the fan down soon, the storm would set it down for him. Better to retain a modicum of control. He pushed the control wheel. If he could get down in one piece, he ought to be home free. There

was a high-power homing device built into the radio-corn. It would transmit an automatic SOS on a private channel, to be received by an illegal station near Vaanland .

Caitland was a loyal, trusted, and highly valued employee of that station's owners. There was no doubt in his mind that once it was received by them, they would act on the emergency signal. Just now his job was to ensure they would find something worth taking back.

The fanship dipped lower. Caitland fought the wind with words and skillful piloting. It insisted on pushing him sideways when he wanted to go up or down.

There ... a place where the dense green-black mat of forest thinned briefly and the ground looked almost level. Low, over, a little lower. Now hard on the stick, slipping the fan sideways, so that the jets could counteract the force of the scudding wind. Then cut power, cut more, and prepare to settle down.

A tremendous howl reverberated through the little cabin as a wall of rain-laden wind shoved like a giant's hand straight down on the fanship . Jets still roaring parallel to the ground, the fan slid earthward at a 45-degree angle.

First one blade , then a second of the double rotors hit a tree. There were a metallic snap, several seconds of blurred vision—a montage of tree trunks, lightning and moss-covered earth—followed by stillness.

He waited, but the fan had definitely come to a stop. Rain pierced the shattered dome and pelted forehead and face, a wetness to match the saltier taste in his mouth. The fan had come to rest on its side. Only a single strap of the safety harness had stayed intact. It held him in the ruined cabin by his waist.

He moved to release it—slowly, because of the sharp, hot pain the movements caused in the center of his chest. He coughed, spat weakly. Bits of broken tooth joined the rest of the wreckage.

His intention was to let himself down gently to a standing position. His body refused to cooperate. As the waist buckle uncoupled he fell the short distance from his seat to the shattered side of the fan. Broke inside, he thought hazily. Rain seeped into his eyes, blurred his vision.

Painfully he rolled over, looked down the length of the fan. The flying machine was ruined forever. Right now, the walking machine had to get away from it. There was always the chance of an explosion.

It was then he discovered he couldn't move his left leg. Lying exhausted, he tried to study the forest around him in the darkness and driving rain.

Driving rain. The fan had broken a circle in the branches overhead. It would be drier under the untouched trees—and he had to get away from the explosive residue in the fan's tanks.

It appeared to be the lower part of the leg. All right, if he couldn't walk, he could crawl. He started to get to his knees—and couldn't finish. Hurt worse than he'd first thought.

Never mind the chance of explosion, rest was what he had to have. Rest. He lay quietly in the water-soaked ruins of the fan, rain tinkling noisily off the broken plexidome and twisted metal, and listened to the wind moan and cry around him.

Moan? Cry? His head came up dizzily. There was something more than wind out there. A sharp, yes definitely musical quaver that came from all about him. He stared into the trees, saw no one. The effort

cost him another dizzy spell and he had to rest his eyes before trying again.

Nothing in the trees, no. But, something about the nearest trunk . . . and the one to its left . . . and possibly the two near by on the other side. Something he should recognize. Too weak to raise a shielding hand, he blinked moisture away and studied the closest bole through slitted eyes.

Yes. The trunk appeared to be expanding and contracting ever so slightly, steadily. His attention shifted to its neighbors. Hints of movement were visible throughout the forest, movement unprompted by wind or rain.

Chimer trees. Chee chimer trees. They had to be.

But there weren't supposed to be any wild chimers left on Chee world, nor as many as four together anywhere outside of the big agricultural research station.

Maybe there were even more than four. He found himself developing a feeling of excitement that almost matched the pain. If he had stumbled on a chimer forest...

Neither imagination nor intellectual prowess were Caitland's forte, but he was not an idiot. And even an idiot knew about the chimers. The finding of one tree anymore was extraordinary, to locate four together, incredible. That there might be more was overwhelming.

So, finally, was the pain. He passed out

The face that formed before Caitland's eyes was a woman's, but not the one he'd been soundlessly dreaming of. The hair was gray, not blond; the face lined, not smooth; skin wrinkled and coarse in the hollows instead of tear-polished; and the blouse was of red-plaid flannel instead of silk. Only the eyes bore any resemblance to the dream, eyes even bluer than those of the teasing sleep-wraith.

An aroma redolent of fresh bread and steaming meats impinged on his smelling apparatus. It made his mouth water so bad it hurt. At the same time a storm of memories came flooding back. He tried to sit up.

Something started playing a staccato tune on his ribs with a ball-peen hammer. Falling back, he clutched at a point on his left side. Gentle but firm hands exerted pressure there. He allowed them to remove his own, set them back at his sides.

The voice was strong but not deep. It shared more with those blue-blue eyes than the parchment skin. "I'm glad you're finally awake, young man. Though heaven knows you've no right to be. I'm afraid your machine is a total loss."

She stood. A straight shape of average height, slim figure, eyes, and flowing gray hair down to her waist; the things anyone would notice first.

He couldn't guess at her age. Well past sixty, though.

"Can you talk? Do you have a name? Or should I go ahead and splint your tongue along with your leg?" Caitland raised his head, moved the blankets aside, and stared down at himself. His left leg was neatly splinted. It was complemented by numerous other signs of repair, most notably the acre of bandage that encircled his chest.

"Ribs," she continued. "I wasn't sure if you'd broke all of them or just most, so I didn't take any chances.

The whole mess can heal together.

"I had the devil's own time trying to get you here, young man. You're quite the biggest thing in the human line I've ever encountered. For a while I didn't think I was going to get you on the wagon." She shook her head. "Pity that when we domesticated the horse we didn't work on giving him hands."

She paused as though expecting a reply. When Caitland remained silent she continued as though nothing had happened.

"Well, no need to strain your brain now. My name is Naley, Katherine Naley. You can call me Katie, or Grandma.*" She grinned wryly. "Call me Grandma and I'll put rocks in your stew." She moved to a small metal cabinet with a ceramic top on which a large closed pot sat perspiring.

"Should be ready soon."

Her attention diverted to the stove, Caitland let his gaze rove, taking stock of his surroundings. He was on a bed much too small for him, in a small house. Instead of the expected colonial spray-plastic construction, the place looked to be made of hewn stone and wood. Some observers would probably find it charming and rustic, but to Caitland it only smacked of primitiveness and lack of money.

She called back to him. "I'll answer at least one of your questions for you. You've been out for two days on that bed."

"How did I get here? Where's my fan? Where is this place?" She looked gratified.

"So you can talk. You got here in the wagon. Freia pulled you. Your ship is several kilometers down the canyon, and you're in a valley in the Silver Spars. The second person ever to set foot in it, matter of fact."

Caitland tried to sit up again, found it was still all he could do to turn his head toward her.

"You went out in that storm by yourself?" She nodded, watching him, "You live here along?" Again she nodded. "And you hauled me all the way—several kilometers—up here, and have been watching me for two days?"

"Yes."

Caitland's mind was calibrated according to a certain scale of values. Within that scale decisions on any matter came easy. None of this fit anywhere, however.

"Why?" he finally asked.

She smiled a patronizing smile that he ordinarily wouldn't have taken from anyone.

"Because you were dying, stupid, and that struck me as a waste. I don't know anything about your mind yet except that it doesn't include much on bad weather navigation, but you're fairly young and you've got an excellent body, still. And mine, mine's about shot. So I saw some possibilities. Not that I wouldn't have done the same for you if you'd been smaller than me and twenty kilos lighter. I'm just being honest with you, whoever you are."

"So where's the catch?" he wondered suspiciously. She'd been ladling something into a large bowl from the big kettle. Now she brought it over.

"In your pants, most probably, idiot. I might have expected a thank-you. No, not now. Drink this."

Caitland's temper dissolved at the first whiff of the bowl's contents. It was hot, and the first swallow of the soup-stew seared his insides like molten lead. But he finished it and asked for more.

By the fourth bowl he felt transformed, was even able to sit up slightly, carefully. He considered the situation.

This old woman was no threat. She obviously knew nothing about him and wouldn't have been much of a threat if she had. His friends might not find him for some time, if ever, depending on the condition of the radio-com broadcaster. And just now there was the distinct possibility that representatives from the other side of the law would be desirous of his company. He could just as soon do without that. Lawyers and cops had a way of tangling your explanations about things like self-defense.

So in many respects this looked like a fine place to stay and relax. No one would find him in the Silver Spars and there was nowhere to walk to. He leaned back into the pillow.

Then he heard the singing.

The melody was incredibly complex, the rhythm haunting. It was made of organ pipes and flutes and maudlin bassoons, mournful oboes and a steady backbeat, all interwoven to produce an alien serenity of sound no human orchestra could duplicate. Scattered through and around was a counterpoint of oddly ; metallic, yet not metal bells, a quicksilver tinkling like little girl-boy laughter.

Caitland knew that sound. Everyone knew that sound. The chimer tree produced it. The chimer tree, a mature specimen of which would fetch perhaps a hundred thousand credits.

But the music that sounded around the house was wilder, stronger, far more beautiful than anything Caitland in his prosaic, uncomplicated existence had ever imagined. He'd heard recordings taken from the famed chimer quartet in Geneva Garden. And he knew that only one thing could produce such an over-, powering wealth of sound—a chimer tree forest.

But there were no more chimer forests. Those scattered about the Chee world had long since been located, transplanted tree by tree, bartered and sold in the first heady months of discovery by the initial load of colonists. And why not, considering the prices that were offered for them?

Chimer forests hadn't existed for nearly a hundred years, as best he could remember. And yet the sound could be of nothing else.

"That music," he murmured, entranced.

She was sitting in a chair nearby, ignoring him in favor of the thick book in her lap. He tried to get out of bed, failed. "The music," he repeated.

"The forest, yes," she finally replied, confirming his guess. "I know what you're thinking: that it's impossible, that such a thing doesn't exist anymore. But it's both possible and true. The mountains have protected this forest, you see—the Silver Spars' inaccessibility, and also the fact that all the great concentrations of chimers were found far, far to the south of Holda -mere. Never this far east, never this far north.

"This forest is a freak, but it has survived, survived and developed in its isolation. This is a virgin forest, never cut, Mr...."

"Caitland, JohnCaitland ."

"An untouched forest, Mr.Caitland .Unsoiled by the excavators or the predators, unknown to the music lovers."Her smile disappeared. ". . .To the music eaters, those whose desire for a musical toy in their homes destroyed the chimers."

"It's not their fault,"Caitland objected, "that the chimers don't reproduce when transplanted. People will have what they want, and if there's enough money to pay for what they want, no mere law is going to prevent . . ." He stopped. That was too much already. "It's a damned shame they can't reproduce in captivity, but that's—"

"Oh but they can," the old woman broke in. "I can make them."

Caitlandstarted to object, managed to stifle his natural reaction. He forced himself to think more slowly, more patiently than was his wont. This was a big thing. If this old bat wasn'tlooney from living alone out in the back of nowhere, and if she had found a way to make the chimers reproduce in captivity, then she could make a lot of people veryvery wealthy.Or a few people even wealthier.Caitland knew of at least one deserving candidate.

"I hadn't heard," he said warily, "that anyone had found a way to make the trees even grow after replanting."

"That's because I haven't told anyone yet," she replied crisply. "I'm not ready yet. There are some other things that need to be perfected for the telling first.

"Because if I announce my results and then demonstrate them, I'll have to use this forest.And if the eaters find this place, they'll transplant it, rip it up, take it apart, and sell it in pieces to the highest bidders. And then I won't be able to make anything reproduce, show anybody anything.

"And that will be the end of the chimer tree, because this is the last forest. When the oldest trees die a couple of thousand years from now there'll be nothing left but recordings, ghosts of shadows of the real thing. That's why I've got to finish my work here before I let the secret—and this location—out."

It made things much simpler for the relievedCaitland . She was crazy after all. Poor old bitch. He could understand it, the loneliness and constant alien singing of the trees and all. But she'd also saved his life. Caitland was not ungrateful. He would wait.

He wondered, in view of her long diatribe, if she'd try to stop him from leaving.

"Listen," he began experimentally, "when I'm well enough I'd like to leave here. I have a life to get back to, myself. I'll keep your secret, of course ... I understand and 'sympathize with you completely.How about a—?"

"I don't have a power flutter," she said.

"Well then, yourfanship ."

She shook her head, slowly.

"Ground buggy?" Another negative shake. Caitland's brows drew together. Maybe she didn't have to worry about keeping him here. "Are you trying to tell me you have no form of transportation up here whatsoever?"

"Not exactly. I have Freia, my horse, and the wagon she pulls. That's all the transportation I need that and what's left of my legs. Once a year an old friend airdrops me necessary supplies. He doesn't land and he's no botanist, so he's unaware of the nature of this forest. A miner, simple man, good man.

"My electronic parts and such, which I code-flash to his fan on his yearly pass over, constitute most of what he brings back to me. Otherwise," and she made an expansive gesture, "the forest supplies all my needs."*

He tensed. "You have tri-dee or radio communication, for emergencies, with the—"

"No, young man, I'm completely isolated here. I like it that way."

He was wondering just how far off course the storm had carried him. "The nearest settlement—Vaanland?"

She nodded. That was encouraging, at least. "How far by wagon?"

"The wagon would never make it. Terrain's too tough. Freia brought me in—and out onetime, and back again, but she's too old now, I'd say."

"On foot, then."

She looked thoughtful. "A man your size, in good condition, if he were familiar with the country . . . I'd say three to four months, barring mountain predators, avalanche, bad water, and other possibilities,"

So he would have to be found. He wasn't going to find his way out of here without her help, and she didn't seem inclined to go anywhere. Nor did threats of physical violence ever mean much to people who weren't right in the head.

Anyhow, it was silly to think about such things now. First, his leg and ribs had to mend. Better to get her back on a subject she was more enamored of. Something related to her delusions.

"How can you be so sure these trees can be made to reproduce after transplanting?"

"Because I found out why they weren't and the answer's simple. Any puzzle's easy to put together, provided none of the pieces fall off the table. If you're well enough to walk in a few days, I'll show you. The crutches I've got are short for you, but you'll manage."

The forest valley was narrow, the peaks cupping it between their flanks high and precipitous. Ages ago a glacier had cut this gorge. Now it was gone, leaving gray walls, green floor, and a roof of seemingly perpetual clouds, low-hanging clouds which shielded it from discovery by air.

The old woman, despite her disclaimers, seemed capable of getting around quite well. Caitland felt she could have matched his pace even if he weren't burdened with the crutches, though she insisted any strenuous climbing was past her.

Despite the narrowness of the valley, the forest was substantial in extent. More important, the major trees were an astonishing fifty-percent chimer. The highest density in the records was thirty-seven percent. That had been in the greatSavanna forest on the south continent, just below the capital city of Danover . It had been stripped several hundred years ago.

Katie expounded on the forest at length, though resisting the obvious urge to talknonstop to her first visitor in—another questionCaitland had meant to ask.

Chimer trees of every age were here, mature trees at least fifteen hundred years old; old trees, monarchs of the forest that had sung their songs through twice that span; and youngsters, from narrow boles only a few hundred years old down to sprouting shoots no bigger than a blade of grass.

Everything pointed to a forest that was healthy and alive, a going biological concern of a kind only dreamed about in botanical texts. And he was limping along in the middle of it, one of only two people in the universe aware of its existence.

It wasn't the constant alien music, or the scientific value that awed him. It was the estimated number of chimer trees multiplied by some abstract figures. The lowest estimateCaitland could produce ran into the hundreds of millions.

He could struggle intoVaaland , register claim to this parcel ofbackland , and—and nothing. One of the things that madeCaitland an exceptional man among his type was that he respected his own limitations. This was too big for him. He was not a developer, not a front man, not a Big Operator.

Very well, he would simply take his cut as discoverer and leave the lion's share for those who knew how to exploit it. His percentage would be gratefully paid. There was enough here for everyone.

He listened to the music, at once disturbing and infectious, and wished he could understand the scientific terms the old woman was throwing at him.

The sun had started down when they headed back toward the house—cabin,Caitland had discovered, with an adjoining warehouse. Nearly there, Katie stopped, panting slightly. More lines showed in her face now, lines and strain from more than age.

"Can't walk as far as I used to.That's why I needFreia , and she's getting on, too." She put a hand out, ran a palm up and down one booming young sapling. "Magnificent, isn't it?" She looked back at him.

"You're very privileged, John. Few people now alive have heard the sound of a chimer forest except on old recordings.Very privileged." She was watching him closely. "Sometimes I wonder..." "Yeah," he muttered uncomfortably. She left the tree, moved to him and felt his chest under the makeshift shirt she'd sewn him. "I mended this clothing as best I could, and I tried to do the same with you. I'm no doctor. How do your ribs feel?"

"I once saw a pet wolfhound work on an old steak bone for a couple of weeks before he'd entirely finished with it. That's what they feel like."

She removed her hand. "They're healing. They'll continue to do so, provided you don't go falling out of storms in the next couple of months." She started on

again.

He followed, keeping pace with ease, taking up great spaces with long sweeps of the crutches. His bulk dwarfed her. Towering above, he studied the wasted frame, saw the basic lines of the face and body. She'd been a great beauty once, he finally decided. Now she was like a pressed flower to a living one.

What, he wondered, had compelled her to bury herself in this wilderness? The forest kept her, but what had brought her here in the first place?

"Look," he began, "it looks like I'm going to be here for a while." She was watching him, and laughed at that. She was always watching him, not staring, but not looking away, either. Did she suspect something? How could she? That was nonsense. And if she did, he could dispose of her easily, quickly. The ribs and leg would scarcely interfere. He could...

"I'd like to earn my keep." The words shocked him even as he mouthed the request.

"With those ribs? Are you crazy, young man? I admit I might have thought of much the same thing, but—"

"I don't sponge off anyone, lady—Katie Habit." She appeared to consider, replied, "All right. I think I know an equally stubborn soul when I see one. Heaven knows there are a lot of things I'd like to have done that this body can't manage. I'll show them to you and when you feel up to it, you can start in on them."

He did, too, without really knowing why. He told himself it was to keep his mind occupied and lull any suspicions she might develop—and believed not a word of his thoughts.

He hauled equipment, rode with her in the rickety wagon to check unrecognizable components scattered the length and breadth of the valley, cut wood, repaired a rotting section of wall in the warehouse, repaired the cabin roof, tended to Freia and the colt—and tried to ignore those piercing eyes, those young-old blue eyes that never left him.

And because he wouldn't talk about himself much, they spent spare moments and evenings talking about her, and her isolation, and the how and why of it.

She found the forest nearly thirty years ago and had been here constantly, excepting one trip, ever since. In that time she'd confirmed much that was suspected, all that was known, and made many new discoveries about the singing trees.

They began to make music when barely half-meter high snoots, and retained that ability till the last vein of sap dried in the aged trunk. They could grow to a height of eight meters and a base diameter of ten.

Chimers had been uprooted and transplanted since their music-making abilities had been first discovered. At one time it seemed there was hardly a city, a town, a village, or wealthy individual that didn't own one or two of the great trees.

Seemingly, they thrived in their new environments, thrived and sang. But they would not reproduce—from seeds, from cuttings, nothing. Not even in the most controlled greenhouse ecology, in which other plants from Chee survived and multiplied. Only the chimer died out.

But few of those wealthy music lovers had ever heard a whole forest sing, Caitland reflected.

The song of the forest, he noticed, varied constantly. The weather would affect it, the cry of animals, the time of day. It never stopped, even at night.

She explained to him how the trees sang, how the semiflexible hollow trunk and the rippling protrusions inside controlled the flow of air through the reverberating bole to produce an infinite range of sound. How the trunk sound was complemented by the tinkling bells—chimes—on the branches. Chimes which were hard, shiny nuts filled with loose seeds.

With the vibration of the main trunk, the branches would quiver, and the nuts shake, producing a light, faintly bell-like clanging.

"And that's why," she finally explained to him, "the chimers won't reproduce in captivity. I've calculated that reproduction requires the presence of a minimum of two hundred and six healthy, active trees.

"Can you think of any one city, any one corporation, any one system that could afford two hundred and six chimers of a proper spread of maturity?"

Of course he couldn't. No system, not even Terra-Sol, could manage that kind of money for artistic purposes.

"You see," she continued, "it takes that number of trees, singing in unison, to stimulate the bola beetle to lay its eggs. Any less and it's like an orchestra playing a symphony by Mahler. You can take out, say, the man with the cowbell and it will still sound like a symphony, but it won't be the right symphony. The bola beetle is a fastidious listener."

She dug around in the earth, came up with a pair of black, stocky bugs about the size of a thumbnail. They scrambled for freedom.

"When the nuts are exactly ripe, the forest changes to a specific highly intricate melody with dozens of variations. The beetles recognize it immediately. They climb the trees and lay their eggs, several hundred per female, within the hollow space of the nuts. The loose seeds inside, at the peak of ripeness, provide food for the larvae while the hard shell protects them from predators. And it all works out fine from the bola's point of view—except for the tumbuck .

"That small six-legger that looks like an oversized guinea pig?"

"That's the one. The tumbuck , John, knows what that certain song means, too. It can't climb, but it's about the only critter with strong enough teeth to crack a chimer nut. When the ripe nuts drop to the ground, it cracks them open and uses its long, thin tongue to hunt around inside the nut, not to scoop out the seeds, which it ignores, but the insect eggs.

"It's the saliva of the tumbuck , deposited as it seeks out the bola eggs, which initiates the germinating process. The tumbuck leaves the nut alone and goes off his search of other egg-filled ones. Meanwhile the seed is still protected by most of its shell.

"Stimulated by the chemicals and dampness of the tumbuck saliva, the first roots are sent out through the crack in the shell and into the ground. The young plant lives briefly inside the shell and finally grows out through the same crack toward the light.

"It's the song of the massed trees that's the key. That's what took me twenty years to figure out. No

wonder bola beetles and tumbucks ignored the nuts of the transplanted chimers. The music wasn't right. You need at least two hundred and six trees—the full orchestra."

Caitland sat on the wooden bench cut from a section of log and thought about this. Some of it he didn't understand. What he could understand added up to something strange and remarkable and utterly magnificent, and it made him feel terrible.

"But that's not all, John Caitland. My biggest discovery started as a joke on myself, became a hobby, then an obsession." There was a twinkle in her eyes that matched the repressed excitement in her voice. "Come to the back of the warehouse."

A metal cabinet was set out there, one Caitland had never seen her open before. Leads from it were connected, he knew, to a number of complex antennae mounted on the warehouse roof. They had nothing to do with long-range communications, he knew, so he'd ignored them.

The instrumentation within the cabinet was equally unfamiliar. Katie ran her hand up and down the bole of a young chimer that grew almost into the cabinet, then moved her hands over the dials and switches within. She leaned back against the tree and closed her eyes, one hand resting on a last switch, the other stroking the trunk, like a cat, almost.

"Now look, John, and tell me what you feel." She threw the switch.

For long seconds there was nothing different, only the humming of the bat-winged mammals that held the place of birds here. And that familiar song of the forest.

But even as he strained all his senses for he knew not what, the song changed. It changed unabashedly and abruptly, astoundingly, fantastically.

Gloriously.

Something grand thundered out of the forest around him, something too achingly lovely to be heard. It was vaguely familiar, but utterly transformed by the instrument of the forest, like a tarnished angel suddenly made clean and holy again.

To Caitland, whose tastes had never advanced beyond the basal popular music of the time, this sudden outpouring of human rhythm couched in alien terms was at once a revelation and a mystery. Blue eyes opened and she stared at him as the music settled into a softer mode, rippling, pulsing about and through them.

"Do you like it?*"

"What?" he mumbled lamely, overpowered, awed.

"Do you like it?*"

"Yeah. Yeah, I like it." He leaned back against the wall of the cabin and listened, let the new thing shudder and work its way into him, felt the vibrations in the wood wall itself. "I like it a lot. It's . . ." and he finished with a feeling of horrible inadequacy, "... nice."

"Nice?" she murmured, the one hand still caressing the tree. "It's glorious, it's godlike—it's Bach. The 'Toccato and Fugue in D Minor,' of course."

They listened to the rest of it in silence. After the last thundering chord had died away and the last echo had rumbled off the mountainsides, and the forest had resumed its normal chant, he looked at her and asked. "How?"

"Twelve years of experimentation, of developing proper stimulus procedures and designing the hardware and then installing it. The entire forest is weird. You've helped me fix some of the older linkages yourself. Stimulus-response, stimulus-response. Try and try and try again, and give up in disgust, and go" back for another try.

"My first successful effort was 'row, row, row your

boat.* It took me nine years to get one tree to do that. But from then on response has been phenomenal. I've reduced programming time to three months for an hour's worth of the most complex Terran music. Once a pattern is learned, the forest always responds to the proper stimulus signal. The instrumental equivalents are not the same, of course."

"They're better," Caitland interrupted. She smiled.

"Perhaps. I like to think so. Would you like to hear something special? The repertoire of the forest is still limited, but there's the chance that—"

"I don't know," he answered. "I don't know much about music. But I'd like to learn, I think."

"All right then, John Caitland. You sit yourself down and relax."

She adjusted some switches in the console cabinet, then leaned back against her tree. "It was observing the way the slight movements caused by the vibrations seemed to complement each other that first gave me the clue to their reproductive system, John. We have a few hours left before supper." She touched the last

switch.

"Now this was by another old Terran composer." Olympian strains rolled from the trees around them as the forest started the song of another world's singer.

"His name was Beethoven," she began.

Caitland listened to the forest and to her for many days. Exactly how many he never knew because he didn't keep track. He forgot a lot of things while he was listening to the music and didn't miss them.

He would have been happy to forget them forever, only they refused to be forgotten. They were waiting for him in—the form of three men—one day. He recognized them all, shut the cabin door slowly behind him.

"Hello, John," said Morris softly. Wise, easygoing, ice-hard Morris,

Three of them, his employer and two associates. Associates of his, too,

"We'd given you up for lost," Morris continued. "I was more than just pleased when the old lady here

told us you were all right. That was a fine job you did, John, a fine job. We know because the gentleman in 'question never made his intended appointment."

"John." He looked over at Katherine. She was sitting quietly in her rocking chair, watching them. "These gentlemen came down in a skimmer, after lunch. They said they were friends of yours. How did you do on the broadcast unit?"

"Fixed some wiring, put in a new power booster," he said automatically. "They're business associates, Katie."

"Rich business associates," added Ari, the tall man standing by the stove. He was examining the remains of a skinned scholite —dinner. He was almost as big as Caitland. Their similarities went further than size.

"It's not like you to keep something like this to yourself, John," Morris continued, in a reserved tone that said Caitland had one chance to explain things and it had better be good.

Caitland moved into the main room, put his backpack and other equipment carefully onto the floor. If his body was moving casually his mind was not. He's already noticed that neither Ari nor Hashin had any weapons out; but that they were readily available went without saying. Caitland knew Morris's operating methodology too well for that—he'd been a cog in it himself for three years now. A respected, well-paid cog.

He spoke easily, and why not, it was the truth.

"There's no fan or flitter here, not even a motorbike, Mr. Morris. You can find that out for yourself, if you want to check. Also no telecast equipment, no way of communicating with the outside world at all."

"I've seen enough electronic equipment to cannibalize a simple broadcast set," the leader of the little group countered.

"I guess maybe there is, if you're a com engineer,"

Caitland retorted. Morris appeared to find that satisfactory, even smiled slightly.

"True enough. Brains aren't your department, after all, John." Caitland said nothing.

"Even so, John, considering a find like this," he shook his head, "I'm surprised you didn't try to hike out."

"Hike out how, Mr. Morris? The storm blew me to hell and gone. I had no idea where I was, a busted leg, a bunch of broken ribs, plus assorted bruises, contusions, and strains. I wasn't in any shape to walk anywhere, even if I'd known where I was in relation to Vaanland. How did you find me, anyway? Not by the automatic comcaster, or you'd have been here weeks ago."

"No, not by that, John." Morris helped himself to the remaining chair. "You're a good man. The best. Too good to let rot up here. We knew where you were to go to cancel the appointment. I had a spiral charted from there and a lot of autofliers out hunting for you. They spotted the wreckage of your fan three days ago. I got here as fast as I could. Dropped the business, everything." He rose, walked to a window and looked outside, both hands resting on the sill.

"Now I see it was all worth waiting for. Any idea how many trees there must be in this valley, Caitland?" He ought to be overjoyed at this surprise arrival. He tried to look overjoyed.

"Thousands," Morris finished for him, turning from the window. "Thousands. We'll file a formal claim first thing back in Vaanland. You're going to be rich, John. Rich beyond dream. I hope you don't retire on it—I need you. But maybe we'll all retire, because we're all going to be rich.

"I've waited for something like this, hoped for it all my life, but never expected anything of this magnitude. Only one thing bothers me." He turned sharply to stare at the watching Katherine. "Has she filed a claim on it?"

"No," Caitland told him. "It should still be open land." Morris relaxed visibly.

"No problem, then. Who is she, anyway?"

"A research botanist," Caitland informed him, and then the words tumbled out in a rapid stream. "She's found a way to make the trees reproduce after transplanting, but you need a full forest group, at least two hundred and six trees for it. If you leave at least that many, out of the thousands, we'll be able to mine it like a garden, so there'll always be some trees avail-ble."

"That's a good idea, John, except that two hundred and six trees works out to about twenty million credits. What are you worrying about saving them for? They live two, sometimes three thousand years. I don't plan to be around then. I'd rather have my cash now, wouldn't you?"

"Ari?" Caitland's counterpart looked alert. "Go to the skimmer and call Nohana back at the lodge; Give him the details, but just enough so that he'll know what piece of land to register. Tell him to hop down to Vaanland and buy it up on the sly. No one should ask questions about a piece of territory this remote, anyway."

The other nodded, started for the door but found a small, gray-haired woman blocking his way.

"I'm sorry, young man," she said tightly, looking up at him, "I can't let you do that." She glanced frantically at Caitland, then at Morris and Hashin. "You can't do this, gentlemen. I won't permit it. Future generations—"

"Future generations will survive no matter what happens today," Morris said easily.

"That's not the point. It's what they'll survive in that—"

"Lady, I work hard for my money..I do a lot of things I'd rather not do for it, if I had my druthers. Now, it seems, I do. Don't lecture me. I'm not in the mood."

"You mustn't do this."

... "Get out of my way, old woman," rumbled Ari warningly.

"Katie, get out of his way," Caitland said quietly.

"It'll be all right, you'll see."

She glared at him, azure eyes wild, tears starting. "These aresubhumans, John. You can't talk to them,

you can't reason with them. Don't you understand? They don't think like normal human beings, they haven't the same emotions. Their needs spring from vile depths that—"

"Warned you," Ari husked. A massive hand hit her on the side of the head. The thin body slammed into the doorsill, head meeting wood loudly, and crumpled soundlessly to the floor. Ari stepped over one bent withered leg and reached for the handle. Caitland broke his neck.

There was no screaming, no yells, no sounds except for the barely articulate inhuman growl that might have come from Caitland's throat. Hashin's gun turned a section of the wall where Caitland had just stood into smoking charcoal. As he spun, he threw the huge corpse of the dead Ari at the gunman.

It hit with terrible force, broke his jaw and nose. Splinters from the shattered nose bone pierced the brain. Morris had a high-powered projectile weapon. He put four of the tiny missiles into Caitland's body before the giant beat him into permanent silence.

It was still in the room for several minutes. Eventually, one form stirred, rose slowly to its feet. A bruise mark the size of a small plate forming on her temple, Katherine staggered over to where Caitland lay draped across the bulging-eyed, barely human form of Morris. She rolled the big man off the distorted corpse. None of the projectiles had struck anything vital. She stopped the bleeding, removed the two metal cylinders still in the body, wrestled the enormous limp form into bed.

It was time to wait for him again.

Caitland stayed with her in the mountains for another sixteen years. It was only during the last two that she grew old with a speed that appalled and stunned him. When the final disease took hold, it was nothing exotic or alien, just oldness. The overworked body was worn out.

She'd been on the bed for days now, the silvered hair spread out like steel powder behind her head, the wrinkles uncamouflaged by smiles anymore, the energy in the glacier-blue eyes fading slowly.

"I think I'm going to die, John."

He didn't reply. What could one say?

"I'm scared." He took the flimsy hand in his own. "I want it to be outside. I want to hear the forest again,

John."

He scooped up the frighteningly thin form, blankets and all, and took her outside. There was a lounge chair he'd built for her a year ago, next to the young tree by the control cabinet.

"... hear the forest again, John..." He nodded and went to the console (which he'd long since become as expert at operating as she), thought a moment, then set the instrumentation. They'd added a lot of programming these past years, from her endless crates of tapes.

The alien chant faded, to be replaced by a familiar melody, one of his and her favorites .

"I can't reach the tree, John," came the whispery, paper-thin voice. He moved the lounge a little nearer to the tree, took her arm, and pressed her hand against the expanding, contracting trunk. She had to touch the tree, of course. Not only because she loved the forest and its music, but for the reason he'd discovered fifteen years ago.

The reason why she always followed him with her eyes—so she could see his face, his throat ... his lips.

She'd been completely deaf since the age of twelve. No wonder she'd been so sensitive to the vibrations of the trees. No wonder she'd been so willing to isolate herself, to leave the rest of a forever incomprehensible mankind behind. No wonder.

There was a cough after an hour or so. Gradually cold crept into the other hand, the one he held. He folded it over the shallow chest, brought the other one across, too. Crying he'd have none of. He was too familiar with death to cry in its presence.

Instead he watched as the music played out its end and the sun went down and the stars appeared, foam-like winking friends of evening looking down at them.

Someday soon he would go down and tell the rest of mankind what lived and thrived and sang up here in a deep notch of the Silver Spars. Someday when he thought they were hungry and deserving enough. But for a little while longer he would stay. He and the shell of this remarkable woman, and Freia's daughter, and listen to the music.

He sat down, his back against the comforting massage of the pulsing bark, and stared up into the out-flung branches where loose seeds rang like bells inside hard-shelled nuts and the towering trunk exhaled magnificence into the sky.

This part coming up now, this part he knew well. The tree expanded suddenly, shuddered and moaned, and the thunder of the rising crescendo echoed down the valley as thrice a thousand chimers piled variation and chorus and life into it

Beethoven, it was.