

Leigh Brackett

ALL THE COLORS OF THE RAINBOW

It had rained in the valley, steadily and hard, for thirty-six hours. The ground was saturated. Every fold in the rough flanks of the hills spouted a muddy torrent and the torrents flowed in sheets over the flat country below and poured through raw self-gouged channels into the river. And the river, roused from its normal meek placidity, roared and rolled like a new Mississippi, tearing away its banks, spreading wide and yellow across the fields, into the orchards and over the roads, into the streets of Grand Falls where the people had left their houses and fled to the safety of higher land. Uprooted trees and broken timbers knocked at the walls of the old brick buildings on the main street. In the lobby of the Grand Falls Hotel the brass spittoons floated ever higher, clanging mournfully when they struck their sides together.

High on the ridges that enclosed the valley to the northeast and the southwest, hidden by a careful hand, two small mechanisms hummed quietly, ceaselessly. They were called miniseeders and they were not part of Earth's native technology. Their charges would run out in a matter of days, but in the meantime they were extremely efficient, hurling a steady stream of charged particles into the sky to seed the clouds moving over the ridges.

In the valley, it continued to rain. . .

IT WAS HIS FIRST BIG JOB ON his own responsibility, with no superior closer than Galactic Center, which was a long way off. He was not at all sure he was going to be able to do it.

He said so to Ruvi, slowing down the cumbersome ground car so she could see what he meant.

"Look at it. How can this mess ever be made into a civilized continent?"

She turned her head in the quick way she had and said, "` , ` Scared, Flin?"

"I guess I am."

He was ashamed to say it, particularly since it was not really the difficulty and importance of the job that daunted him but the planet itself.

He had studied weather-control engineering on his home-world at Mintaka, which was one of the science's earliest triumphs, and he had done research and field work on five other worlds, at least two of which were in fairly early stages of control. But he had never been anywhere before that was so totally untouched by galactic civilization.

Peripheral Survey had made contact with these fringe systems only in the last couple of decades and that was far too short a time to make much of an impress on them. Even in the big urban centers an alien like himself could hardly walk down the street yet without attracting an unwelcome amount of attention, not all of it polite. Coming from the Federation worlds with their cosmopolitan populations, Flin found this hard to take.

But Galactic Center was enthusiastic about these fringe worlds because quite a few of them had an amazingly high, if highly uneven, degree of civilization which they had developed literally in their several vacuums. Center was in a rush to send them teachers and technicians and that was why he, far ahead of his due time, had been pitchforked into the position of leading a four-man planning-and-instruction team of weather-control experts.

It was a splendid opportunity with splendid possibilities for the future, and the raise in pay had enabled him to take on Ruvi as a permanent mate much sooner than he had hoped. But he hadn't bargained for the loneliness, the constant uncertainty in relationships, the lack of all the vast solid background he was used to on the Federation worlds.

Ruvi said, "All right then, I'll admit I'm scared too. And hot. Let's stop this clumsy thing and get a breath of air. Right over there looks like a good place."

He eased the car off the narrow road, onto a point of land with a few big stones around the edge to mark the drop-off. Ruvi got out and went to stand by them, looking out over the valley. The breeze pressed her thin yellow tunic against her body and ruffled the soft short silvery mass of curls around her head. Her skin glistened even under this alien sun with the dark lovely green of youth and health. Flin's heart still turned over in him every time he looked at her. He did not suppose this would last forever but as long as it did it was a beautiful sort of pain.

He made sure he had done the required things to keep the car from bolting away over the cliff and then joined her. The breeze was hot and moisture-laden, full of strange smells. The valley wound away in a series of curves with a glint of water at the bottom. On either side of it the rough ridges rolled and humped, blue in the distance where the heat haze covered them, rank green closer at hand with the shaggy woods that grew wild on them, the trees pushing and crowding for space, choked with undergrowth and strangling vines, absolutely neglected.

"I suppose," said Ruvi, "they're full of wild animals, too."

"Nothing very dangerous, I believe."

Ruvi shivered slightly. "Whenever I get just a little way out of the cities I begin to feel that I'm on a truly savage world. And everything's wrong. The trees, the flowers, even the grass-blades are the wrong shape, and the colors are all wrong, and the sky isn't at all the way it ought to be."

She laughed. "Anyone would know this was my first trip away from home."

Two huge birds came into sight over one of the ridges. They hung in the sky, wheeling in slow circles on still gray-brown wings. Instinctively Flin put his arm around Ruvi, uncertain whether the birds would attack. They did not, drifting on down over the valley where the air currents took them. There was no sign of human habitation and except for the narrow road they might have been in a complete wilderness.

"It is rather beautiful, though," Ruvi said, "in its own way."

"Yes."

"I guess that's the only standard you really should use to judge things, isn't it? Their own."

Flin said sourly, "That's easier to do when you know what 'their own' standard is. They seem to have thousands of them here. That's why Sherbondy keeps telling us to get out and see the country, to learn what his people are really like." Sherbondy was their contact with the local Government, a big hearty man with an enormous enthusiasm for all the things that were going to be done. "The only trouble with that is that it would take a lifetime to—"

There was a noise like an avalanche behind them. Flin jumped and turned around, but it was only a huge red vehicle roaring by, spouting smoke from a pipe behind the driver's compartment. The driver noticed them just before the truck passed out of sight and Flin thought the man was going to drive it right into the woods while he was staring.

He sighed. "Let's go."

They got back into the car and Flin managed to get it back onto the road and headed in the direction he wanted to go without mishap—always, he felt, a minor triumph. The primitive vehicles that were subject to everybody's individual whim of operation on these equally primitive road systems still frightened the wits out of him after nearly six months.

It was just as hot as ever. As a gesture of courtesy, and to avoid attracting any more attention than was necessary, he had adopted the local variety of shirt and pants. Most of the men in the various instruction groups did this soon after landing. It didn't seem to matter what the women of the groups wore as long as certain puritanical tabus were observed, but the men found it less embarrassing to conform. Flin thought the garments abominably uncomfortable and envied Ruvy her relatively cool tunic.

She seemed wilted and subdued, leaning back in the corner of the wide overstuffed seat, her eyes half closed, the graceful tilted contours of her face accentuated by the gleaming of sweat on the delicate ridges.

"I think of home," she said, "and then I think of the money."

"It's something to think of."

The woods rolled by, clotted underneath with deep shadow, full of rustlings and rank dusty smells. Sometimes they passed a kind of food-raising station that had not been seen in the Federation for centuries, where part of the land was in several kinds of crops and part of it in pasture and the whole thing was operated by one man and his family. Sometimes they passed through little towns or villages with very strange names, where the people stared at them and the children pointed and yelled, Green niggers, lookit the green niggers!

Flin studied the houses. They were different from each other, and quite different from the ones he had grown used to in the cities, but they were all built on the same hut-based principle. He tried to imagine what life

would be like in one of these towns, in one of these wooden or stone or brick houses with the queer decorations and the pointed roofs. Probably Sherbondy was right. Probably all the Federation people should try to get closer to the everyday life of the planet, familiarize themselves with what the people thought and felt, how they coped with their environment. The next few decades would see changes so radical and complete that this present life would soon begin to be forgotten...

The change had already begun. This planet—the native name for it was Earth, a rather pretty one, Flin thought—had been making its first wobbling steps into space on its own when the Survey ships arrived. With Federation technicians and techniques that process had been enormously accelerated. The first manned ships built on Earth and operated by Federation-trained but native-born personnel had been licensed for limited service within the last seven or eight years. Planning surveys were under way, guided by groups like his own, not only in weather-control but in global unification, production, education, and above all pacification—the countless things that would have to be accomplished to make Earth a suitable member of the Federation.

But these things had not yet made themselves felt on the population as a whole. Most of Earth was going along just as it always had, and Flin knew from experience that many of the natives even on the administrative level were extremely touchy and proud, not inclined to accept any sudden alterations in their thinking; probably the more provincial masses were even more so. It would be necessary to win them over, to make them feel that they were equals in the task and not merely the recipients of gifts from an older and wider culture.

It would be a long, interesting business. An energetic young man who stuck with it could make a career out of it, a satisfying and very profitable one.

The only trouble was—Ruvi's thoughts seemed to have paralleled his own, because she said, "Are we going to stay on here?"

"We have to stay until we've finished our immediate job."

"But after that? I know some of the men have already decided to."

"The offers these people make are very good," Flin said slowly. "They'll need technicians and educators for a long time yet, and Center is in favor of it because it'll speed up integration." He reached out and patted her. "We could be rich and famous."

She smiled, very fleetingly. "All right," she said in a quiet voice, "I'll start making myself like it."

She began to stare grimly at the queerly shaped and colored trees, the peculiar houses that looked so dreadfully functional, the crowds of chattering natives in the towns. Finally she shook her head and gave up, lying back with her eyes closed.

"I'll try it again sometime when it isn't so hot." "Weather-control will fix that."

"But not for years."

They drove in silence. Flin felt vaguely ill at ease and unhappy, but he kept thinking of Sherbondy's offer and the things it might lead to for them, and he did not say anything. He did not want to commit himself with Ruvi yet, one way or the other.

About mid-afternoon there was a violent downpour of rain accompanied by thunder and lightning. As a weather expert Flin knew perfectly well what caused the disturbance, but the knowledge did nothing to decrease the effect of it on himself. Ruvi simply hid her head in the corner and shook. Flin kept on driving. If you let the natives know that you were afraid of their weather, they would never believe that you would be able to control it. He made it a practice in Washington to walk out in storms that had even the natives cowering. He could barely see the road well enough to stay on it and he was nervous about floods, but he trundled resolutely ahead.

Eventually he ran out of the storm, or it passed over. The sun came out again, boiling and steaming the saturated air. It was difficult to breathe. Great black clouds still bulked in the sky, presaging more trouble later. In the strange light the countryside took on a look completely alien and somehow ominous, the little scattered houses crouching among their weird trees like suspicious gnomes with hostile eyes, the empty fields and dripping woods suggestive of infinite loneliness.

"I'm tired and hungry," Ruvi said. "Let's stop."

"The next town that has accommodations." Flin was tired himself. He found driving a strain and yearned for the fleet little air-cars that darted so easily and safely through the peaceful skies of the Federation worlds. They would not be practical here until global weather-control was an actuality.

The next town was a long way off. The road lifted and wound through low rough mountains and over brawling stream beds. The villages they passed through were very tiny, sometimes with only two or three dwellings.

The shadows grew heavy in the valleys. Ruvi began to fret a bit. Flin knew that it was only because the shadows and the wild country made her nervous, but it irritated him. He was having trouble enough of his own. An animal of some sort stuttered across the road and he nearly went into the ditch avoiding it. The light was bad. He was worried about the fuel gauge, which was low. And the road seemed to go on forever through a steadily darkening tunnel of trees.

They passed a tiny wooden temple next to one of the absolutely barbaric native burying grounds that always horrified them, the ritual stones gleaming pallid among uncut grass and briar roses. It all flashed by so quickly that Flin realized he had pushed the speed of the big car beyond the limit of safety. So he was already slowing down when he swung around a curve and came right onto a farm vehicle moving very slowly in the road. He managed to go around it without hitting anything but it gave him a sharp fright. The man driving the thing shouted after them. Flin could not hear exactly what he said but there was no doubt he was angry. After that Flin went carefully.

There began to be painted signs along the edge of the road.

Ruvi read them off. "Restaurant. Hotel. Garage. There is a town ahead. Grand Falls, I think."

The road passed suddenly over a crest and there was a wide irregular valley below them, full of light from the low sun which shone through a gap in the west. Perhaps Flin was in an exceptionally receptive mood but it struck him as one of the loveliest places he had seen. There was a river flashing with curious dull glints from the setting sun, rolling smoothly over a pretty little falls that burst into bright foam at the bottom. The white houses of the town were bowered in trees and blooming vines, slumbrous and peaceful in the hot evening, with one tall white spire standing over them.

"Look, I see the hotel," said Ruvi, pointing. "Oh glorious, how I will love a cool bath before dinner!"

She ran her fingers through her silvery curls and sat up straight beside him, smiling as he drove down the hill into Grand Falls.

It had rained here recently. The pavements still glistened and the air steamed with it. There was a fragrance of nameless flowers, very sweet and heavy. On the shadowy porches of the houses along the way there was a sound of voices and hidden laughter, and the small scurrying shapes of children moved under the dripping trees.

The road became the main street splashed with the crude colors of neon signs, the lighted windows showing yellow in the dusk. On both sides now there were curious low buildings, apparently quite old, built tight together so that each row looked like one building except its front was broken up into narrow vertical sections with different cornices and different patterns of wood or brickwork around the windows. They were mostly of red brick, which seemed to be a common building material, and not above two stories high.

The shops and offices were closed. The eating and drinking places were open and busy, and somewhere inside there was music playing, a strong simple beat with a high-pitched male voice wailing over it. The smell of flowers was drowned out by the pungence of hot wet brick and hotter, wetter asphalt. A few couples walked toward the gaudily lighted entrance of a theatre farther along the street, the women wearing bright-colored dresses, their long hair done in elaborate coiffures, their thick sturdy legs and arms bare. Knots of young men lounged against the walls near the drinking places. They were smoking the universal cigarettes and talking, looking after the women.

Seen close up now the town was less beautiful than it had looked from the crest. The white paint was dirty and peeling, the old buildings poorly kept up.

"Well," Flin muttered, "Sherbondy said to get off the beaten track and see the real native life undiluted."

"The hotel looks charming," Ruvi said determinedly. "I am not going to quarrel with anything."

Even in the dusk they were beginning to draw attention. First the little knots of idlers were attracted by the long gleaming car with the Government plates, and then by Flin and Ruvy themselves. There were other cars in the street, both moving and parked along the curb, but the one Flin was driving seemed to be newer and fancier than most. He could see people pointing and looking at them. He swore silently and wondered if they could have dinner sent up to their room.

The hotel was on the corner of the main intersection. It was three stories high, built of the red brick, with a crudely ornate cornice and long narrow windows. A balcony ran around its two exposed sides at the second floor level, extending over the street and supported on slender metal pillars which had once been painted white. A second tier of pillars on the balcony itself supported a roof. There were five or six oldish men sitting in chairs on the balcony, and several more below on the covered portion of the street.

Flin looked at it doubtfully. "I wonder if it has a bath."

Her own enthusiasm somewhat cooled, Ruvy said, "It'll do for one night. It might be a long way to the next one and I don't suppose it would be any better."

Flin grunted and pulled the car in to the curb and stopped.

There was a scraping of chair legs as the men sat forward or rose to come closer. Flin got out and walked around the car. He smiled at the men but they only stared, blowing strong smoke and squinting through it at him and the car and the license plates and then at Ruvy.

Flin turned and opened the door for her. He noticed over the low roof of the car that men were beginning to come from across the street, and already a number of boys had sprung from nowhere and were clustering like insects, their eyes bright and excited.

He helped Ruvy out, slim in her yellow tunic, her silver curls picking up the light from the tall front door of the hotel.

One of the men said in a high shrill voice. "Green as grass, by God!" There was laughter and somebody whistled.

Flin's face tightened but he did not say anything nor look at the men. He took Ruvy's arm and they went into the hotel.

They walked on a faded carpet, between islands of heavy furniture in worn leather and dusty plush. Fans turned slowly against the ceiling, barely disturbing either the hot air or the moths that had come in to flutter around the lights. There was a smell that Flin could not fully identify. Dust, the stale stink of dead tobacco, and something else—age, perhaps, and decay. Behind the large wooden desk a gray-haired man had risen from a chair and stood with his hands spread out on the desk top, watching them come.

The men from the street followed, crowding quickly through the doors. On particular man seemed to lead them, a red-faced fellow wearing an amulet on a gold chain across his broad paunch.

Flin and Ruvi stood in front of the desk. Once more Flin smiled. He said, "Good evening."

The gray-haired man glanced past them at the men who had come in, bringing with them a many-faceted odor of sweat to add to what was already inside. They had stopped talking, as though they were waiting to hear what the gray-haired man would say. The fans in the ceiling creaked gently as they turned.

The gray-haired man cleared his throat. He, too, smiled, but there was no friendliness in it.

"If you're wanting a room," he said, with unnecessary loudness as though he were speaking not to Flin but to the others in the lobby, "I'm sorry, but we're filled up."

"Filled up?" Flin repeated.

"Filled up." The gray-haired man took hold of a large book which lay open in front of him and closed it in a kind of ceremonial gesture. "You understand now. I'm not refusing you accommodations. I just don't have any available."

He glanced again at the men by the door and there was a little undertone of laughter.

"But—" said Ruvi, on a note of protest.

Flin pressed her arm and she stopped. His own face was suddenly hot. He knew the man was lying, and that his lie had been expected and was approved by the others, and that he and Ruvi were the only two people there who did not understand why. He also knew that it would do them no good to get into an argument. So he spoke, as pleasantly as he could.

"I see. Perhaps then you could tell us of another place in town—"

"Don't know of any," said the gray-haired man, shaking his head. "Don't know of a single place."

"Thank you," said Flin and turned around and walked back across the lobby, still holding Ruvi's arm.

The crowd had grown. Half the people in Grand Falls, Flin thought, must be gathered now on that one corner. The original group of men, reinforced to twice its size, blocked the doorway. They parted to let Flin and Ruvi through but they did it with a certain veiled insolence, staring hard at Ruvi who bent her head and did not look at them.

Flin walked slowly, refusing to notice them or be hurried. But their nearness, the heat and smell of them, the sense of something menacing about them that he did not understand, twisted his nerves to a painful tightness.

He passed through the door, almost brushing against a young girl who squealed and jumped back out of his way with a great show of being afraid of him. There was a bunch of young people with her, both boys and girls, and they began a great cackling and shoving. The crowd had become more

vocal as it grew. There were a lot of women in it now. Flin waited politely for them to separate, moving a step at a time toward the car, and the voices flew back and forth over his head, at him, around him.

—ain't even human!

Hey, greenie, can't you afford to feed your women where you come from? Lookit how skinny-

Are they kidding with that crazy hair?

—just like I seen on the teevee, and I says to Jack then, Jack Spivey I says, if you ever see anything like them coming down the road

Hey, greenie, is it true your women lay eggs?

Laughter. Derision. And something deeper. Something evil. Something he did not understand.

He reached the car and got Ruvi into it. As he bent close to her he whispered in her ear, in their own language, "Just take it easy. We're getting out."

Mama, how come them funny niggers got a bigger car'n we got?

Because the Government's payin' them big money to come and kindly teach us what we didn't know before. "Please hurry," whispered Ruvi.

He started around the car to get in and found his way blocked by the red-faced man with the gold chain, and beyond him a solid mass in the street in front of the car. He sensed that they were not going to let him through, so he stopped as though he had intended to do so and spoke to the man with the chain.

"I beg your pardon—could you tell me how far it is to the next city?"

The girls were giggling loudly over Ruvi's tunic and the way she looked generally. They were all the fat-hipped, heavy-breasted local type, with thick legs and thick faces. Flin thought they had very little to criticize. Just beyond the man with the gold chain were four or five younger men standing together. They had very obviously come out of one of the taverns. They were lean rangy young men with their hair slicked down and their hips thrust forward in a curiously insolent slouch. They had eyes, Flin thought, like animals. They had been by the door when he came out. They were still looking at Ruvi.

"The next city?" said the man with the gold chain.

He accented the word city as Flin had. He had a deep, ringing voice, apparently well used to addressing crowds. "A hundred and twenty-four miles."

A long way at night through strange country. A great anger boiled up in Flin but he kept it carefully inside. "Thank you. I wonder where we might get something to eat before we start?"

"Well now, it's pretty late," the man said. "Our restaurants have just about now stopped serving. Am I right, Mr. Nellis?"

"You are, Judge Shaw," said a man in the crowd.

This too was a lie, but Flin accepted it. He nodded and said, "I must have fuel. Where—"

"Garage is closed," Shaw said. "If you got enough to get you down the road a piece there's a pump at Patch's roadhouse. He's open late enough."

"Thank you," said Flin. "We will go now."

He started again, but Shaw did not move out of Flin's way. Instead he put up his hand and said, "Now just a minute there, before you go. We've been reading about you people in the papers and seeing you on the teevee but we don't get much chance to talk to celebrities here. There's some questions we'd like to ask."

The rangy young men with the animal eyes began to sidle past Shaw and behind Flin toward the car, leaving a heavy breath of liquor where they moved.

"A damn lot of questions," somebody shouted from the back, "like why the hell don't you stay home?"

"Now, now," said Shaw, waving his hand, "let's keep this friendly. Reverend, did you have something to say?"

"I certainly do," said a fat man in a soiled dark suit, shouldering his way through the crowd to stand peering at Flin. "I bet I've preached a sermon on this subject three Sundays out of five and it's the most important question facing this world today. If we don't face it, if we don't answer this question in a way that's acceptable to the Almighty, we might just as well throw away all these centuries of doing battle with Satan and admit we're licked."

"Amen," cried a woman's voice. "Amen to that, Reverend Tibbs!"

Reverend Tibbs thrust his face close to Flin's and said, "Do you consider yourselves human?"

Flin knew that he was on dangerous ground here. This was a religious man and religion was strictly a local affair, not to be discussed or meddled with in any way.

So he said cautiously, "On our own worlds we consider ourselves so. However, I am not prepared to argue it from your viewpoint, sir."

He moved toward the car, but the crowd only pulled in and held him tighter.

"Well now," said the Reverend Tibbs, "what I want to know is how you can call yourselves human when it says right in Scriptures that God created this good Earth here under my feet and then created man—human man—right out of that self-same earth. Now if you—"

"Oh, hell, save that stuff for the pulpit," said another man, pushing his way in front of Tibbs. This one was sunburned and leathery, with a lantern jaw and keen hard eyes. "I ain't worried about their souls and I don't care if they're all pups to the Beast of the Apocalypse." Now he spoke directly to Flin. "I been seeing faces on my teevee for years. Green faces like yours. Red ones, blue ones, purple ones, yellow ones—all the colors of the rainbow, and what I want to know is, ain't you got any white folks out there?"

"Yeah!" said the crowd and nodded its collective heads.

The man they called Judge Shaw nodded too and said, "I reckon you put the question for all of us, Sam."

"What I mean is," said the lantern-jawed Sam, "this here is a white town. In most other places nowadays, I understand, you'll find blacks and whites all run together like they were out of the same still, but we got kind of a different situation here, and we ain't the only ones, either. There's little pockets of us here and there, kind of holding out, you might say. And we ain't broken any laws. We didn't refuse to integrate, see. It was just that for one reason or another what colored folks there was around—"

Here the crowd snickered knowingly.

"—decided they could do better somewheres else and went there. So we didn't need to integrate. We don't have any color problem. We ain't had any for twenty I years. And what's more, we don't want any."

A shout from the crowd.

Shaw said in his big booming voice, "The point we'd like to make clear to you, so you can pass it on to whoever's interested, is that some of us like to run our lives and our towns to suit ourselves. Now, this old Earth is a pretty good place just as she stands, and we never felt any need for outsiders to come and tell us what we ought to do. So we ain't any too friendly to begin with, you see? But we're not unreasonable, we're willing to listen to things so as to form our own judgments on them. Only you people had better understand right now that no matter what goes on in the big cities and other places like that, we aren't going to be told anything by a bunch of colored folks and it doesn't matter one damn bit what color they are. If—"

Ruvi gave a sudden cry.

Flin spun around. The young men who smelled of liquor were beside the car, all crowded together and leaning in over the door. They were laughing now and one of them said, "Aw now, what's the matter? I was just—"

"Flin, please!"

He could see her over their bent backs and bobbing heads, as far away from them as she could get on the seat. Other faces peered in from the opposite side, grinning, hemming her in.

Somebody said in a tone of mock reproach. "You got her scared now, Jed,

ain't you ashamed?"

Flin took two steps toward the car, pushing somebody out of the way. He did not see who it was. He did not see anything but Ruvi's frightened face and the backs of the young men.

"Get away from there," he said.

The laughter stopped. The young men straightened slowly. One of them said, "Did I hear somebody say something?"

"You heard me," said Flin. "Get away from the car."

They turned around, and now the crowd was all quiet and watching. The young men were tall. They had big coarse hands, strong for any task. Their mouths hung open a little to show their teeth, and they breathed and smiled, and their eyes were cruel.

"I don't think," said the one they called Jed, "I liked the tone of your voice when you said that."

"I don't give a damn whether you liked it or not." "You gonna take that, Jed?" somebody yelled. "From a nigger, even if he is a green one?"

There was a burst of laughter. Jed smiled and tilted his weight forward over his bent knees.

"I was just trying to talk friendly with your woman," he said. "You shouldn't object to that."

He reached out and pushed with his stiffened fingers hard against Flin's chest.

Flin turned his body and let the force of the thrust slide off his shoulder. Everything seemed to be moving very slowly, in a curiously icy vacuum which for the moment contained only himself and Jed. He was conscious of a new and terrible feeling within him, something he had never felt before. He stepped forward, lightly, strongly, not hurrying. His feet and hands performed four motions. He had done them countless times before in the gymnasium against a friendly opponent. He had never done them like this before, full force, with hate, with a dark evil brute lust to do injury. He watched the blood spurt from Jed's nose, watched him fall slowly, slowly to the pavement with his hands clutching his belly and his eyes wide open and his mouth gasping in astonishment and pain.

Outside this center of subjective time and hate in which he stood Flin sensed other movement and noise. Gradually, then with urgent swiftness, they came clear. Judge Shaw had thrust himself in front of Flin. Others were holding Jed, who was getting up. A swag-bellied man with a badge on his shirt was waving his arms, clearing people away from around the car, Jed's friends among them. There was a confused and frightening clamor of voices and over it all Shaw's big authoritative voice was shouting.

"Calm down now, everybody, we don't want any trouble here."

He turned his head and said to Flin, "I advise you to be on your way just as

fast as you can go."

Flin walked around the car where the policeman had cleared the way. He got in and started the motor. The crowd surged forward as though it was going to try and stop him in spite of Shaw and the policeman.

Suddenly he cried out at them.

"Yes, we have white folks out there, about one in every ten thousand, and they don't think anything of it and neither do we. You can't hide from the universe. You're going to be tramped under with color—all the colors of the rainbow!"

And he understood then that that was exactly what they feared.

He let in the drive and sent the big car lurching forward. The people in the street scattered out of his way. There were noises as thrown objects struck the top and sides of the car and then the street was long and straight and clear ahead of him and he pushed the throttle lever all the way down.

Lights flashed by. Then there was darkness and the town was gone.

Flin eased back on the throttle. Ruvi was bent over in the seat beside him, her hands covering her face. She was not crying. He reached out and touched her shoulder. She was trembling, and so was he. He felt physically sick, but he made his voice quiet and reassuring.

"It's all right now. They're gone."

She made a sound—a whimper, an answer, he was not sure. Presently she sat erect, her hands clenched in her lap. They did not speak again. The air was cooler here but still oppressive with moisture, almost as clammy as fog against the skin. No stars showed. Off to the right there were intermittent flashes of lightning and a low growling of thunder.

A clot of red light appeared on the night ahead, resolving itself into a neon sign. Patch's. The roadhouse with the pump.

Ruvi whispered, "Don't stop. Please don't stop."

"I have to," he said gently, and pulled off the road onto a wide gravelled space beside a ramshackle frame building with dimly lighted windows. Strongly rhythmic music played inside. There was a smaller building, a dwelling-house, beside the tavern, and midway between them was a single fuel pump.

Flin stopped beside it. Hardly realizing what he was doing, he turned and fumbled in the back seat for his hat and jacket and put them on, pulling the hatbrim down to hide his face as much as possible. Ruvi had a yellow shawl that matched her tunic. She drew it over her head and shoulders and made herself small in the corner of the seat. Flin switched off the dashboard lights.

A raw-boned lanky woman came out of the dwelling.

Probably the man ran the tavern, leaving her to tend to smaller matters.

Trying to keep his voice steady, Flin asked her to fill the tank. She hardly glanced at him and went surlily to the pump. He got out his wallet and felt with shaking hands among the bills.

On the dark road beyond the circle of light from the tavern, a car went slowly past.

The pump mechanism clicked and rang its solemn bells and finally was still. The woman hung up the hose with a clash and came forward. Flin took a deep breath. He thrust a bill at her. "That'll be eight-eighty-seven," she said and took the bill and saw the color of the hand she took it from. She started to speak or yell, stepping back and bending suddenly in the same movement. He saw her eyes shining in the light, peering into the car. Flin had already started the motor. He roared away in a spurt of gravel, leaving the woman standing with her arm out, pointing after them.

"We won't have to stop again until we reach the city. It'll be all right there."

He threw his hat into the back seat. Ruvy let the shawl fall away from her head.

"I've never wanted to hide my face before," she said. "It's a strange feeling."

Flin muttered savagely, "I've got a lot to say but I can't say it now, not if I'm going to drive."

The road was narrow and black beneath the thunderous sky, between the empty fields and dark woods.

There was another car in the road ahead, moving slowly.

Flin overtook it.

It was well out in the middle. He waited a moment for the driver to see that he wanted to pass and make room for him. The car continued to block the road. He sounded his horn, politely at first and then loudly. The car stayed where it was, moving slower and slower so that he had to brake to keep from hitting it.

"What are they doing?" whispered Ruvy. "Why won't they let us by?"

Flin shook his head. "I don't know."

He began to be afraid.

He pulled as far as he could to the left, riding on the rough berm. He sounded the horn and tramped on the throttle.

The other car swerved too. Its rear fender struck his front one. Ruvy screamed. Flin steadied the wildly lurching car. Sweat prickled like hot needles all over his skin. He stamped his foot hard on the brake.

The other car skidded on ahead. Flin swung the wheel sharp right and pushed the throttle down, whipping the big car across the road and onto

the berm on the other side.

For one brief moment he thought he was going to make it. But the other car swayed over with ruthless speed and punched and rebounded and punched again with its clattering fenders like a man pushing another with his shoulder. Holes and stones threw Flin's car back and forth. He fought to control it, hearing the voices of men shouting close by ...

Hit the sonofabitch, knock his goddam ass off the road, That's the way

There was a tree ahead. His headlights picked it up, brought it starkly into view, the rough-textured bark, the knots and gnarls, the uneven branches and dark leaves. Flin spun the wheel frantically. The lights made a wide slicing turn across meadow grass and weeds. The car bounded, leaped, sprang over uneven ground and fell with a jarring crash into the ditch of a little stream and died.

Silence, dazed and desperate.

Flin looked back. The other car had stopped at the side of the road. Men were getting out of it. He counted five. He thought he knew what men they were.

He reached across Ruvy and opened the door and pushed her ahead of him. "We're going to run now," he said, surprised at the flat banality of his voice, as though he were speaking to a child about some unimportant game. The car tilted that way and Ruvy slid out easily. Flin came behind her into mud and cold water that lapped around his ankles. He half helped, half threw her up the low steep bank and followed, grabbing her hand then and pulling her along.

He did not look back again. He did not have to. The men called as they ran, laughing, hooting, baying like great hounds.

Crooked fire lighted a curtain of black cloud. Flin saw trees, a clump of woods. The fire died and was followed by a hollow booming. The woods vanished. He continued to run toward them. The grass and weeds tangled around his legs. Ruvy lagged, pulling harder and harder against his grip, sobbing as she ran.

They were among the trees.

He let go of her. "Go on. Hide yourself somewhere. Don't make a sound no matter what happens."

"No. I won't leave—"

He pushed her fiercely, trying not to scream at her aloud. "Go on!"

The young men came loping through the long grass, into the trees. They had a light. Its long white beam probed and poked.

See anything?

Not yet.

Who's got the bottle? I'm dry from runnin'.

See anything?

They're in here somewhere.

Breath rasping in big hard throats, legs ripping the undergrowth, feet trampling the ground.

I'm gonna find out, by God. After I take care of that sonofabitch I'm gonna find out.

Whatcha gonna find out, Jed?

If it's true they lay eggs or not.

Laughter.

Who's got the goddam bottle?

Wait a minute, hey, right there, swing that light back, I hear the bastards moving

Hey!

Flin turned, straightening his shoulders, standing between them and Ruvi.

One of them held the light in his face. He could not see them clearly. But he heard the voice of the one called Jed speaking to him.

"All right, greenie, you're so anxious to teach us things—it ain't fair for us to take and not give, so we got a lesson for you."

"Let my wife go," said Flin steadily. "You have no quarrel with her."

"Your wife, huh?" said Jed. "Well now, how do we know she's your wife? Was you married here under the laws of this land?"

"We were married under our own laws—"

"You hear that, boys? Well, your laws don't cut any ice with us, greenie, so it don't seem that you are man and wife as we would say. Anyway, she stays. That's part of the lesson."

Jed laughed. They all laughed.

In their own language Min said to Ruvi, "Run now."

He sprang forward at the man holding the light.

Another man moved quickly from the side and struck him across the shoulders and neck with something more than the naked hand. A tree branch, perhaps, or a metal bar. Flin went down, stunned with pain. He heard Ruvi cry out. He tried to tell her again to run but his voice had left him. There were scuffling sounds and more cries. He tried to get up and hard-shod feet kicked him and stamped him down. Iron knuckles battered his face. Jed bent over him and shook him.

"Hold him up there, Mike, I want to be sure he hears this. You hear me, greenie? Lesson One. Niggers always keep to their own side of the road."

Crash. Blood in the mouth, and pain.

Ruvi?

"Hold him, Mike, goddam it. Lesson Two. When a white man takes a mind to a female nigger, she ain't supposed to get uppity about it. It's an honor, see? She's supposed to be real nice and happy and flattered. See?"

More blood, more pain.

Ruvi, Ruvi!

"Lesson Three. And this one you better remember and write out and hang up where all the other red, blue, green, and purple niggers can see it. You never lay a hand on a white man. Never. No matter what."

Ruvi was quiet. He could not hear her voice.

"You understand that? No matter what!"

Hya-hoo!

Give it to him, Jed. Tell him so he don't forget.

Dark, night, thunder, red fire, red blood, silence, distance, one long fading echoing voice.

—just like a real human woman by God what do you know

Laughter.

Ruvi-

Gone.

There was a great deal of public indignation about it. Newspapers all over the world had editorials. The President made a statement. The Governor made a formal apology for his state and a sincere promise to find and punish the handful of men responsible for the outrage.

Grand Falls protected its own.

No witnesses could be found to identify the men involved in the incident that had occurred in town. Judge Shaw was sure he had never seen them before. So was the policeman. The attack itself had taken place out in the country, of course, and in the dark. Flin did not remember the license number of the car nor had he seen the faces of the men clearly. Neither had Ruvi. They could have been anyone from anywhere.

The name "Jed" by itself meant nothing. There were a number of Jeds in the neighborhood but they were the wrong ones. The right Jed never turned up, and if he had Flin could only have identified him definitely as the man he himself had struck in front of the Grand Falls Hotel. ("Mighty hot tempered, he seemed," Judge Shaw said. "Took offense where I'm sure none was

meant. Like he just didn't understand our ways.")

So there was no finding and no punishment.

As soon as the doctors told him he was fit to travel, Flin informed his group that he was returning home. He had already been in contact with Galactic Center. Someone else would be sent to take his place. They were very angry about the whole thing at home and various steps were being considered. But since Earth was not a member planet she was not subject to galactic law, and since the future of a world was considerably more important than the actions of a few individuals or the feelings of their victims, probably nothing very drastic would be done. And Flin recognized that this was right.

Sherbondy came to see him.

"I feel responsible for all this," he said. "If I hadn't advised that trip—"

"It would have happened sooner or later," Flin said. "To us or to somebody else. Your world's got a long way to go yet."

"I wish you'd stay," said Sherbondy miserably. "I'd like to prove to you that we're not all brutes."

"You don't have to prove that. It's obvious. The trouble now is with us—with Ruvi and me."

Sherbondy looked at him, puzzled.

Flin said, "We are not civilized any more. Perhaps we will be again some day. I hope so. That's one reason we're going home, for psychiatric treatment of a kind we can't get here. Ruvi especially . . ."

He shook his head and began to stride up and down the room, his body taut with an anger he could only by great effort control.

"An act like that—people like that—they foul and degrade everything they touch. They pass on some of themselves. I'm full of irrational feelings now. I'm afraid of darkness and trees and quiet places. Worse than that, I'm afraid of your people. I can't go out of my rooms now without feeling as though I walk among wild beasts."

Sherbondy sighed heavily. "I can't blame you. It's a pity. You could have had a good life here, done a lot—" "Yes," said Flin.

"Well," said Sherbondy, getting up, "I'll say good bye." He held out his hand. "I hope you don't mind shaking my hand—"

Min hesitated, then took Sherbondy's hand briefly. Even you," he said, with real sorrow. "You see why we must go."

Sherbondy said, "I see." He turned to the door. "God damn those bastards," he said with sudden fury. "You'd think in this day and age—Oh, hell . . . Goodbye, Flin. And the best of luck."

He went away.

Flin helped Ruvi with the last of the packing. He checked over the mass of equipment the weather-control group had brought with them for demonstration purposes, which he would be leaving behind for his successor.

Then he said quietly, "There is one more thing I have to do before we go. Don't worry about me. I'll be back in plenty of time for the take-off."

She looked at him, startled, but she did not ask any questions.

He got into his car and drove away alone.

He spoke as he drove, grimly and bitterly, to someone who was not there.

"You wanted to teach me a lesson," he said. "You did. Now I will show you how well you taught me, and how' well I learned."

And that was the real evil that had been done to him and Ruvi.

The physical outrage and the pain were soon over, but the other things were harder to eradicate—the sense of injustice, the rankling fury, the blind hatred of all men whose faces were white.

Especially the hatred.

Some day, he hoped and prayed, he could be rid of that feeling, clean and whole again as he had been before it happened. But it was too soon. Far too soon now.

With two fully charged miniseeders in his pockets he drove steadily toward Grand Falls. . . .