

## The Beast Master

Andre A. Norton © 1959

For OTIS LOUIS ERNEST Soldier Engineer Collector of Indian Lore 1914-1958

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'Sir, there is a transport leaving for that sector tomorrow. My papers are in order, are they not? I think I have all the necessary permits and endorsements –'

The young man who wore the green of a Galactic Commando, with the striking addition of a snarling lion's mask on the breast of his tunic, smiled with gentle detachment at the Commander.

That officer sighed inwardly. Why did they always dump these cases on his desk? He was a conscientious man, and now he was a troubled one. A fourth-generation Sirian colonist and a cosmopolite of mixed races by birth, he secretly believed that no one had fathomed this youngster – not even the psych-medics who had given the boy clearance. The Commander shuffled the papers and glanced down again at the top one, though he did not have to read the information on it, knowing it all by heart.

'Hosteen Storm. Rank: Beast Master. Race: Amerindian. Native planet: Terra of Sol –'

It was that concluding entry that made all the difference. The last desperate thrust of the Xik invaders had left Terra, the mother planet of the Confederacy, a deadly blue, radioactive cinder, and those here at the Separation Centre had to deal with veterans of the forces now homeless –

All the land grants on other worlds, the assistance of every other planet in the Confederacy, would not wipe from the minds of these men the memory of a murdered people, the reality of their own broken lives. Some had gone mad here at the Centre, turning in frantic rage on their allies from the colonial worlds. Or they had used their own deadly weapons on themselves and their fellows. Finally every Terran outfit had been forcibly disarmed. The Commander had witnessed some terrible and some heartbreaking sights here during the past months.

Of course Storm was a special case – as if they weren't all special cases. There had been only a handful of his kind. Less than fifty, the Commander understood, had qualified for the duty this young man had performed. And of that fifty very few had survived. That combination of unusual traits of mind that produced a true Beast Master was rare, and they had been expendable men in the last frenzied months before the spectacular collapse of the Xik invaders.

'My papers, sir.' Again that reminder, delivered in the same gentle voice.

But the Commander dared not let himself be rushed. Storm had never shown any signs of violence – even when they had taken the chance, as a test, of giving him the package from Terra that had been delivered too late at his base after he had departed for his last mission. In fact, the youngster had cooperated in every way with the personnel of the Centre, helping with others the medics believed could be saved. He had insisted upon retaining his animals. But that had caused no difficulty. The staff had watched him closely for months, prepared for some paralysing stroke of delayed shock – for the outburst they were sure must come. But now the medics had reluctantly agreed they could not deny Storm's release.

Amerindian, pure blood. Maybe they were different, better able to stand up to such a blow. But in the Commander's mind a nagging little doubt festered. The boy was too controlled. Suppose they did let him go and there was a bad smash, involving others, later? Suppose – suppose –

'You have chosen to be repatriated on Arzor, I see.' He made conversation, not wanting to dismiss the other.

'Survey records, sir, state that Arzor possesses a climate similar to my native country. The principal occupation is fawn herding. I have been assured by settlement officers that, as a qualified Beast Master, I may safely count on employment there –'

A simple, logical, and satisfactory answer. Why didn't he like it? The Commander sighed again. A hunch – he couldn't refuse this Terran his papers just on a hunch. But his hand moved slowly as he pushed the travel permit into the stamper before him. Storm took the slip from him and stood up, smiling aloofly – a smile the Commander was certain neither reached nor warmed his dark eyes.

Thank you for your assistance, sir. I assure you it is appreciated.' The Terran sketched a salute and left. And the Commander shook his head, still unconvinced that he had done the right thing.

Storm did not pause outside the building. He had been very confident of getting that exit stamp, so confident he had made his preparations in advance. His kit was already in the loading area of the transport. There remained his team, his true companions who did not probe, with the kindest of motives, or try to analyse his actions. It was enough that he was with them, and with them only was he able to feel normal again, not a specimen under clinical observation.

Hosteen Storm of the Dineh – the People, though men of a lighter shade of skin had given another name to his kinsmen, Navajo. They had been horsemen, artists in metal and wool, singers and desert dwellers, with a strong bond tying them to the barren but brightly coloured land in which they had once roamed as nomad hunters, herders, and raiders.

The Terran exile shut away that memory as he came into the storehouse that had been assigned to him for his small, odd command. Storm closed the door, and there was a new alertness in his face.

'Saaaa –' That hiss, which was also a summons, was answered eagerly.

A flapping of wings and talons, which could tear flesh into bloody ribbons, closed on his padded left shoulder as the African Black Eagle that was scouting 'eyes' for Sabotage Group Number Four came to rest, sleek head lowered to draw its beak in swift, slight caress along Storm's brown cheek.

Paws caught at his breeches as a snorting pair of small warm bodies swarmed up him, treating his body like a tree. Those claws, which uncovered and disrupted enemy installations, caught in the tough fabric of his uniform as he clasped the meerkats in his arms.

Baku, Ho, and Hing – and last of all – Surra. The eagle was majesty and winged might, great-hearted and regal as her falcon tendencies dictated. The meerkats were merry clowns, good-humoured thieves who loved company. But Surra – Surra was an empress who drew homage as her due.

Generations before, her breed had been small, yellow-furred sprites in the sandy wastes of the big deserts. Shy cats, with hairy paws, which kept them from sinking into the soft sand of their hunting grounds, with pricked fox ears and fox-sharp faces, possessing the abnormal hearing that was their greatest gift, almost unknown to mankind, they had lived their hidden lives.

But when the Beast Service had been created – first to provide exploration teams for newly discovered worlds, where the instincts of once wild creatures were a greater aid to mankind than any machine of his own devising – Surra's ancestors had been studied, crossbred with other types, developed into something far different from their desert roving kin. Surra's colour was still sand-yellow, her muzzle and ears foxlike, her paws fur sand-shoes. But she was four times the size of her remote forefathers, as large as a puma, and her intelligence was higher even than those who had bred her guessed. Now Storm laid his hand on her head, a caress she graciously permitted.

To the spectator the ex-Commando might be standing impassively, the meerkats clinging to him, his hand resting lightly on Surra's round skull, the eagle quiet on his shoulder. But an awareness, which was unuttered, unheard speech, linked him with animals and bird. The breadth of that communication could not be assessed outside a 'team', but it forged them into a harmonious whole, which was a weapon if need be, a companionship always.

Baku raised her wide wings, moved restlessly to utter a small croak of protest. She disliked a cage and submitted to such confinement only when it was forced upon her. The thought Storm had given them of more ship travel displeased her. He hastened to supply a mental picture of the world awaiting them – mountains and valleys filled with the freedom of the true wilderness – all he had learned from the records here.

Baku's wings folded neatly once again. The meerkats chirruped happily to one another. As long as they were with the others, they did not care. Surra took longer to consider. She must wear collar and leash, restraints that could bring her to stubborn resistance. But perhaps Storm's mind-picture promised even more to her than it had to Baku. She padded across the room, to return holding the hated collar in her mouth, dragging its chain behind her.

'Yat-ta-hay –' Storm spoke softly as always, the sound of the old speech hardly more than a whisper. 'Yat-ta-hay – very, very good!'

The troop ferry on which they shipped out was returning regiments, outfits, squads to several different home planets. That war, which had ended in defeat for the Xik invaders, had exhausted the Confederacy to a kind of weary emptiness, and men were on their way back to worlds that lay under yellow, blue, and red suns firm in the determination to court peace.

As Storm strapped himself down on his bunk for the take-off, awaiting the familiar squeeze, he heard Surra growl softly from her pad and turned his head to meet her yellow gaze. His mouth relaxed in a smile that this time did reach and warm his eyes.

'Not yet, runner on the sand!' He used again that tongue that now and forever here after must be a dead language. "We shall once more point the arrow, set up the prayer sticks, call upon the Old Ones and the Faraway Gods – not yet do we leave the war trail!"

Deep in his eyes, naked now that there was no one but the big cat to see, was the thing the Sirian Commander had sensed in him. The galaxy might lie at peace, but Hosteen Storm moved on to combat once again.

There was a company of Arzoran men on board, third- and fourth-generation descendants of off-world settlers. And Storm listened to the babble of their excited talk, filing away all the information that might be useful in the future. They were frontiersmen, these fighters from a three-quarter wilderness world. Their planet produced one product for export – frawns. Frawn meat and frawn-skin fabric, which had the

sheen of fine silk and the water-repellent quality of ancient vegetable rubber, were making modest fortunes for the Arzor men.

The frawns moved in herds across the plains; their shimmering blue, heavily woolled foreparts and curving horned heads sloping sharply back to slender, almost naked hindquarters gave them a top-heavy look, which was deceitful since the frawn was well able to protect itself. There was no meat elsewhere in the galaxy to compare with frawn steak, no fabric to match that woven from their hair.

'I've two hundred squares cut out down on the Vakind – running straight back to the hills. Get me a crew of riders and we'll –' The fair-haired man Storm knew as Ransford held forth eagerly.

His bunk mate nodded. 'Get Norbies. You don't lose any young stock with them riding herd. They'll take their pay in horses. Quade uses Norbies whenever he can get them –'

'Don't know about that,' cut in a third of the Arzoran veterans. 'I'd rather have regular riders. Norbies aren't like us –'

But Storm lost the thread of the conversation in the sudden excitement of his own thoughts. Quade was not a common name. In all his life he had only heard it once.

'Don't tell me you believe that blather about Norbies being hostile!' The second speaker had challenged the third sharply. 'Me and m' brother always sign Norbies for the roundup, and we run the tightest outfit near the Peaks! Two of 'em are better at roundin' herd than any dozen riders I can sign up at the Crossin'. And I'll name names right out if you want me to –'

Ransford grinned. 'Climb down off your spoutin' post, Dort. We all know how you Lancins feel about Norbies. And I'll agree with you about their bein' good trackers. But there has been trouble with stock disappearin' – as well you know.'

'Sure. But nobody ever proved that Norbies made them disappear. Bush anyone around and he'll try to loosen your teeth for you! Treat a Norbie decent and square, and he's the best backin' you can get in the outcountry. The Mountain Butchers aren't Norbies –'

'Mountain Butchers are herd thieves, aren't they?' Storm asked, hoping to steer the conversation back to Quade.

'That they are,' Ransford returned pleasantly. 'Say, you're the Beast Master who's signed up for settlement, aren't you? Well, if all the stories we've heard about your kind of trainin' are the straight goods, you'll be able to light and tie right off. Mountain Butchers are a problem in the back country. Start a stampede in the right stretch of land, and they can peel off enough young stock durin' it to set up in business. A man and his crew can't cover every bit of the range. That is why it pays to hire Norbies, they know the trails and the broken lands –'

'Where do the Mountain Butchers sell their stolen goods?' Storm asked.

Ransford frowned. 'That's something every owner and rider, every frawn-protection man on the planet would like to know. There's just one space port, and nothin' passes through that without being checked double, sidewise and across. Unless there's some hidden port out in the hills and a freebooter runnin' cargo out – why, you've as good a guess as I have as to what they want the animals for. But they raid –'

'Or Norbies raid and then yell about outlaws when we ask pointed questions,' the third Arzoran

commented sourly.

Lancin bristled. 'That isn't so, Balvin! Don't Quade hire Norbies – and the Basin country swings along by Brad Quade. He and his folks has held that district since First Ship time and they know Norbies! It'd take an eruption of the Limpiro Range to make Quade change his mind –'

Storm's gaze dropped to his own hands resting on the mess table – those brown, thin hands with the thread of an old scar across the back of the left one. They had not moved, nor could any of the three men sitting with him see that sudden change in his eyes. He had the answer he wanted. Brad Quade – this man of importance – whom he had come so far to meet. Brad Quade who had a blood debt to pay to other men on a world where life did not and could not exist, a debt Storm had come to collect. He had sworn an oath as a small and wondering boy, standing before a man of power and knowledge beyond that of other races calling themselves 'civilized'. A war had intervened, he had fought in it, and then he had journeyed halfway across the galaxy –

'Yat-ta-hay –' But he did not say that aloud. 'Very, very good.'

Immigration and custom inspection were only a formality for one with Storm's papers, though the Terran was an object of interest to the officers at the space port as he loosed his animals and Baku. Beast Team tales had been so exaggerated across deep space that Storm believed none of the port personnel would have been surprised if Surra had answered in human speech or Baku waved a stun ray in one taloned foot.

Men on Arzor went armed, though the lethal blaster and the needier were both outlawed. A stun ray rod hung from all adult male belts and private differences were settled speedily with those, or with one's fists – a custom Storm could understand. But the straggle of plasta-crete buildings about the space port was not the Arzor he wanted. The arch of sky overhead, with the tinge of mauve to give it an un-Terran shade, and the wind that swept down from the distant rust-red ripples of mountains hinted of the freedom he desired.

Surra held her head into that wind, her eyes slitted, and Baku's wings lifted a little at its promise. Then Storm halted, his head snapped around, his nostrils dilated as Surra's could. The scent borne on that wind – he was pulled by it, so strongly that he did not try to resist.

Frawn herds ranged widely, and men, who perhaps on the other worlds of their first origin had depended upon machines for transportation, found that the herder here must be otherwise equipped. Machines required expert tending, supply parts that had to be imported at astronomical prices from off-world. But there remained a self-perpetuating piece of equipment that the emigrants to the stars had long known at home, used, discarded for daily service, but preserved because of sentiment and love for sheer grace and beauty – the horse. And horses, imported experimentally, found the plains of Arzor a natural home. In three generations of man-time, they had spread wide, changing the whole economy of both settler and native.

The Dineh had lived by the horse and with the horse for centuries, back into the dim past. Love and need for the horse was bred into them. And the smell of horse now drew Storm as it had when as a child of three he had been tossed on to the back of a steady old mare to take his first riding lesson.

The mounts he found milling about in the space port corral were not like the small tough pony of his native desert land. These were larger, oddly marked in colour – either spotted regularly with red or black spots on white or grey coats and with contrasting dark manes, or in solid dark colours with light manes and tails – strikingly different from the animals he had ridden in the past.

At the shrug of the Terran's shoulder Baku took wing, to perch on the limb of a tree, a black blot amid the yellow foliage, while Surra and the meerkats settled down at the foot of the bulbous trunk, allowing Storm to reach the corral fence alone.

'Nice bunch, eh?' The man standing there pushed up his wide-brimmed, low-crowned hat, plaited from native reed straw, and grinned in open friendliness at the Terran. 'Brought 'em in from Cardol four-five days ago. Got their land legs back now and I can road 'em on tomorrow. They ought to make fellas set up and take notice at the auction –'

'Auction?' Storm's attention was more than three-quarters claimed by a young stallion trotting around, his tail flicking, his dancing hoofs signalling his delight in his freedom to move. His sleek coat was a light grey, spotted with rich red dots coin-sized and coin-round, bright on the hindquarters, fading toward the barrel and chest, with his mane and tail copying that same warm colour.

The Terran did not, in his absorption with the horse, note the long glance with which the settler measured him in return. Storm's green uniform might not be known on Arzor – Commandos furnished a very minor portion of the Confed forces –and he probably wore the only lion mask badge in this part of the galaxy. But that searching examination assessed more than his clothing.

'This is breeding stock, stranger. We have to import new strains from other planets where they shipped horses earlier. There won't be any more of the pure Terran breed to buy now. So this bunch will be driven down to Irrawady Crossin' for the big spring auction –'

'Irrawady Crossing? That's in the Basin country, isn't it?'

'You hit it, stranger. Plannin' to light and tie on some range, or take up your own squares?'

'Light and tie, I guess. Any chance of a herd job?'

'You must be a veteran, come in on that troopship, eh? But I'd say you're off-world, too. Can you ride?'

'I'm Terran.' Storm's answer fell into a sudden silence. In the corral a horse squealed and reared, and the ex-Commando continued to watch the red and grey stallion. 'Yes, I can ride. My people raised horses. And I am a Beast Master –'

'That so?' drawled the other. 'Prove you can ride, boy, and you've signed yourself on with my outfit. I'm Put Larkin; this here's my own string. You take your pay in mounts and get your workin' horse into the bargain.'

Storm was already climbing the rail wall of the corral. He was more eager than he had been for over a year. Larkin caught at his arm.

'Hey, those aren't gentled any –'

Storm laughed. 'No? But I must prove I'm worth my pay.' He swung around to watch the stallion he had marked in his heart for his own.

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Reaching down, Storm jerked at the fastening of the corral gate just as the young horse approached that

point. The red and grey mount came trotting out without realizing for an important second or two that he was now free.

With a speed that left Larkin blinking, the Terran leaped down beside the hesitant horse. His hands were fast in the red mane, drawing the startled animal's head down and around toward him. Then he breathed into the stallion's expanded nostrils, keeping his grip in spite of an attempted rear.

The horse stood shivering when Storm loosed his first hold, to run his hands slowly along the arching neck, up the broad nose, cupping them over the wide eyes for an instant, coming down again to smooth body, legs, barrel. So that at last every inch of the young horse had experienced that steady stroking pressure of the gentling brown hands.

'Got a length of rope?' Storm asked quietly. Larkin was not his sole audience now, and the horse trader took a coil of stout hide twist from one of the other spectators, tossed it to the Beast Master.

The Terran looped it about the horse just behind the front legs. Then in what looked like a single, swift movement he was mounted, his knees braced under the loop, his hands resting lightly on the mane. The stallion shivered again under the grip of the rider's legs, neighed a protest.

'Look out!' At Storm's warning the stallion whirled, plunged away into the open with a bound that did not dislodge his rider. The Terran leaned forward so that the coarse hairs of the mane whipped into his face. He was crooning the old, old words that had tied horses and his race together for the countless years of the past, letting the mount race out his fear and surprise.

At last, when the space port lay behind as a scattering of white beads on the red-yellow earth of this land, the Terran used pressure of his knee, the calm authority of his mind, the gentle touch of hand, the encouragement of voice, to slacken the pace, to turn the now trotting horse back to the corral.

But Storm did not halt by the knot of waiting men, heading instead for the globular trunked tree where his team lazed. The stallion, catching the alien and frightening scent of cat, tried to shy. But Storm spoke soothingly. Surra got to her feet and strolled forward, her leash trailing across the beaten earth. When the stallion would have attacked, the Terran applied knee pressure, the murmur of voice, the weight of mental command, as he had learned to control the team.

So it was the cat that raised forepaws from the ground, sitting well up on her haunches so that those yellow slits of eyes were not far below the level of the foam-flecked muzzle. The stallion's head tossed restlessly and then he quieted. Storm laughed.

'Do you hire me?' he called to Larkin.

The horse trader stared his wonder. 'Boy, you can sign on as breaker any time you've a mind to stack your saddle in my camp! If I hadn't seen this with my own eyes I'd have said some harsh things about double-tongued liars! That there animal's your trail horse, if you want to fork him all the way to the Crossin'. And what are these here?'

'Baku, African Black Eagle.' The bird mantled at the sound of her name, her proud fierce eyes on Larkin. 'Ho and Hing – meerkats –' That clownish pair sniffed high with their pointed noses. 'And Surra – a dune cat – all Terran.'

'Cats and horses don't rightly mix –'

'So? Yet you have seen these two meet,' countered Storm. 'Surra is no wild hunter, she is well-trained, and as a scout also.'

'All right,' Larkin was grinning. 'You're the Beast Master, son, I'll take your word for it. We hit the trail this afternoon. Got your kit?'

'I'll have it.' Storm rode the stallion back to the corral to turn him in with the rest of the herd.

The trail herd was compactly organized by a man who knew his business. Storm had high standards, but he approved of what he saw some two hours later when he joined the party. Ransford and Lancin accompanied him from the veterans' muster-out, willing to hire on as riders for the sheer pleasure of plunging at once into their normal routine of life. Joining with the Terran they bought a small two-wheeled cart for their kit, one that could be hooked on to the herd supply wagon. And when that was packed the meerkats climbed to the top for a ride, while Baku and Surra could be carried or range as they wished.

Storm accepted Lancin's advice in shopping for his own trail equipment, following the veteran's purchases at the space port stores. At the last he changed into the yoris-hide breeches, lined with frawn fabric, tough as metal on the outside and almost as durable as steel, worn with high boots of the same stuff in double thickness. A frawn shirt of undyed silver-blue took the place of his snug green tunic, and he left the lacings on the breast untied in imitation of his companions' informal fashion, enjoying the freedom of the new soft wear.

Before he left the Centre he had obediently exchanged the deadly blaster of service issue for a permitted stun ray rod and the hunting knife of the frontiersman. And now as he settled the broad-brimmed hat of local vintage on his thick black hair and looked into the mirror of the dressing room, Storm was startled at the transformation clothes alone could make. He had further proof of that a short time later when he joined Larkin unrecognized.

Storm smiled. 'I'm your breaker – remember?'

Larkin chuckled. 'Boy, you look like you were born centre-square down in the Basin! This all your kit? No saddle?'

'No saddle.' The light pad he had contrived, the simple headstall, were his own devices. And no one who had watched his taming of the stallion questioned his choices when he again bestrode the red and grey horse for the ride out.

On Arzor, galactic civilization was an oasis built around the space port. As they left that cluster of structures behind and moved south into the haze of the late afternoon, Storm filled his lungs thankfully, his eyes on that range of mountains beyond. There was a flap of wings and Baku spiralled up into the mauve sky, tasting in her turn the freedom of the new world, while Surra lay at ease on the cart and yawned, lazing away the hours before the coming of night, her own special time for exploring.

The road swiftly became a track of earth-beaten hard stone, but Storm knew that Larkin intended to cut across the open lands, making use of the quickly growing wet-season grass for the herd. This was spring and the tough yellow-green vegetation was still tender and thick. In three months more or less the mountain-born rivers would dry up, the lush grass carpet would wither, and trail herds must cease to move until the coming of fall produced a second wet period to revive the land for another short space of a few weeks.

When they camped that night Larkin appointed guards, with a changing schedule, in four-hour shifts.



'Why guards?' Storm questioned Ransford.

'Might not be needed this close to where the law runs,' the veteran agreed. 'But Put wants to get his schedule working before we do hit the wilds. This herd's good stock, worth a lot in the Basin. Let the Butchers stampede us and they could gather up a lot of the loose runners. And, in spite of what Dort Lancin says, there're a lot of Norbie clans who don't care too much about working for their pay in horses. Outer fringe tribes raid to get fresh blood to build up their studs. Breeding stock such as this will bring them sniffing around in a hurry. Then there are yoris – horse is tasty meat as far as those brutes are concerned and a yoris kills more than just its dinner when it gets excited. Let that big lizard stink reach a horse and he high tails it as fast as he can pick up those hoofs and set 'em down!'

Surra aroused from her nap, stretched cat fashion, and then came to Storm. He hunkered down to meet her eye to eye, in his mind outlining the dangers to be watched for. She was already familiar, he knew, with the scent of every man in the herding crew, and with every horse, either ridden or running free. Whatever or whoever did not belong about camp during the hours of the night would have Surra's curiosity to reckon with. Ransford watched her pad away after her briefing.

'You put her on patrol too?'

'Yes. I don't think any yoris can beat Surra. Saaaa –' He hissed the rallying call and Ho and King tumbled into the firelight, climbing over his legs to rear against his chest and pat him lovingly.

'What are they good for?' Ransford asked. They wear pretty big claws, but they're small to be fighters –'

Storm fondled the grey heads with their bandit masks of black about the alert eyes. 'These were our saboteurs,' he replied. 'They dig with those claws and uncover things other people would like to keep buried. Brought a lot of interesting trophies back to base, too. They're born thieves, drag all sorts of loot to their dens. You can imagine what they did to delicate enemy installations in the field –'

Ransford whistled. 'So that's what happened when the power for those posts on Saltair failed and our boys were able to cut their way in! Say – you ought to take them up to the Sealed Caves. Maybe they could get you in there and you'd be able to claim the government reward –'

'Sealed Caves?' At the Centre, Storm had learned what he could of Arzor, but this was something that had not appeared on the Emigrant Agency's record tapes.

'They're one of the tall tales of the mountains,' Ransford supplied. 'You ought to hear Quade talk about them. He knows a lot about the Norbies, went through the drink-blood ceremony with one of their big chiefs. So they told him about the caves. Seems that either the Norbies were more civilized once – or else we weren't the first off-worlders to find Arzor. The natives say there are cities, or what used to be cities, back in the mountains. And that the "old people" who built them went inside these caves and walled up the doors behind them. The big brains down at Galwadi got excited about it one year – sent in some expeditions. But the water is scarce up there, and then the war blew up and stopped all that sort of thing. But they posted a reward for the fella who finds them. Forty full squares of land and four years import privileges free.' Ransford wriggled down into his blankets and pillowed his head on his saddle. 'Dream about it, kid, while you're riding herd circle.'

Storm deposited the meerkats on his own blanket roll where they crept under cover. Baku, one leg drawn up into her under-feathers in the bird of prey's favourite sleeping position, was perched on the rim of the baggage cart. And he knew that both the animals and the bird would remain quiet unless he

summoned them to action.

The stallion that he had named Rain-On-Dust because of its markings was too untried for night herding. So the Terran pad-saddled a well-broken mount Larkin had assigned him as second string. He rode into the dark without any uneasiness. For the past years the night had provided him with a protective shield too many times for him to worry now.

Storm was close to the end of his tour of guard duty when he caught Surra's silent alarm – that swift mind flicker, cutting as keenly as her claws. There was trouble shaping to the northeast. But what – or who –?

He turned his mount in that direction, to hear a squall of cat rage. Surra was giving tongue in open warning now, and Storm caught an answering shout from the camp. He snatched his night beam from the loops on his belt, flashed it on full strength ahead of him, and caught in its path a glimpse of a serpentine scaled head poised to strike. A yoris!

The horse under him plunged, fought against his control, screaming in terror as the musky scent of the giant lizard reached them and the harsh hissing of the yoris hurt their ears. Storm gave attention to his own coming battle, having little fear for Surra. The dune cat was a good and wary fighter, used to strange surprises on alien worlds.

But with all his skill Storm could not force the horse to approach the scaled menace. So he jumped free, into the taint of reptile reek, borne downwind, wafting on to the herd beyond, where hoofs pounded hard on the earth. The loose horses were stampeding.

That part of Storm's mind that was not occupied with the action at hand, speculated on the oddity of this attack. From all accounts the yoris was a wary stalker, a clever wily hunter. Why had the creature headed in tonight with the wind to carry its scent ahead to frighten the meat it hungered for? There was no yoris hatched that could match speed with a panic-stricken horse, and the lizard had to depend upon a surprise attack to kill.

Now, cornered and furious, the scaled creature squatted back upon its haunches, its fearsomely taloned forelegs pumping like machine pistons in its efforts to seize Surra. If the enraged eight-foot reptile was brute strength at bay, the cat was fluid attack, teasing, tempting, always just a fraction out of reach. Storm whistled an urgent call to pierce the hissing of the lizard.

He did not have long to wait. Baku must already have been roused by the clamour. Though the night was not the eagle's favourite hunting time, she came now to deliver the 'kill' stroke of her breed. Talons, which were sickle-shaped, needle-sharp daggers, struck at scales while wings beat about the eyes of the yoris. The lizard flung up its head trying to snap at the eagle, exposing for just the needed instant the soft underthroat. Storm fired a full charge of his stun rod at that target. Meant to shock the nerves and render the victim momentarily unconscious, the impact of a full clip on the throat of the yoris was like the swift sure jerk of a hangman's noose. It choked, beat the air with struggling forefeet, and collapsed.

Storm, knife in hand, leaped forward, moved by the battle reflexes drilled into him. Viscid blood spurted across his hand as he made certain that particular yoris would never hunt again.

Though the yoris was dead, it had lived long enough to bring the orderly herd close to disaster. Had the attack occurred when they were deeper into the wastes, Larkin would have had little chance of retrieving many of the horses. But, though the stampede carried the animals into the wilderness, the mounts were fresh off the space transports and not yet wholly acclimated, so the riders had hopes of rounding them up, though to do so they must now lose valuable days of travel time.

It was almost noon on the morning after the stampede that Larkin rode up to the supply wagon, his face gaunt, his eyes very tired.

'Dort!' He hailed the veteran who had come in just before him. 'I've heard there's a Norbie hunting camp down on the Talarp. Some of their trackers could give us twice as much range now.' He slid down from his overridden mount and stalked stiff-legged to the wagon to eat. 'You talk finger-speech. Suppose you ride over and locate them. Tell the clan chief I'll pay a stud out of the bunch for his help – or a couple of yearling mares.' He sighed and drank thirstily from the mug the cook handed him.

'How many did you boys bring in this morning?' he added.

Storm gestured toward the improvised corral they had thrown up to hold the strays as they were driven back.

'Seven. And maybe we'll have to break a few of them for riding if the rest don't find more of the regular stock. The few we have can't take all this work –'

'I know!' Larkin snapped irritably. 'You wouldn't believe those four-footed idiots could run so fast and so far, would you?'

'I could – if they were deliberately driven.' The Terran awaited the results of that verbal bomb.

While both men stared at him, he continued. That yoris attacked with the wind at its back –'

Dort Lancin expelled his breath in an affirmative grunt. 'The kid's got a point there, Put! You could almost believe that lizard wanted to mess us up like this.'

Larkin's eyes were hard, his mouth a thin, unsmiling line. 'If I believed that –!' His hand went to the grip of his stun rod.

Dort laughed angrily. 'Who you goin' to put to sleep, Put? If some guy planned this deal, he's out there combing the breaks for strays right now, not standing around to wait for you to catch up with him. You'd never set eye on his trail –'

'No, but the Norbies could. Storm, you're green and from off-world, but you've a head on your shoulders. You ride with Dort. If you find any more strays, pick 'em up. Maybe that educated cat of yours can hold 'em for you in some cutback. If there was any funny stuff behind that yoris attack, I want a Norbie scout nosin' around to uncover it.'

Surra could match the pace of the tired horses as they headed toward the distant river bottoms. And Baku rode the air currents above, a fourth and far-searching pair of eyes. By all rights the eagle should locate the native camp first. Storm knew that was true when the black wings spread in a glide and Baku perched on a rock outcrop, her dark plumage very visible against the red of the stone. Having so attracted the Terran's attention, she took off again, leading them more to the southeast.

The horses, scenting water, quickened pace, winding through a thicket of pallid 'puff' bushes where the cottony balls of weird blossoms hung like fur muffs on the leafless branches. Surra, her coat hardly to be distinguished from the normal shade of the alien grass, trotted ahead, sending into the air in terrified leaps some of the odd rodent inhabitants of that limited world.

Dort suddenly drew rein, his hand flung up in warning, so that Storm obeyed his lead. Surra was belly flat and hidden in the grass and Baku came earthward, uttering a sharp, imperative call.

Ok so far I take it we're sighted?' suggested Storm quietly.

'We are. But we won't see a Norbie unless he wants it that way,' Dort returned. 'Yaaaah –' he called, dropping his reins on the horse's neck and raising his hands, palm out.

A physical peculiarity of Norbie throat structure prevented any vocal speech that could either be understood or imitated by the off-world settlers. But there was a well-developed form of communication and Dort employed it now. His fingers moved swiftly, though Storm could hardly separate the signs he made. But his message was understood, for a shadow detached itself from the trunk of a tree and stood out, giving Storm his first sight of a native apart from a tri-dee picture.

The Terran had pored over all the films concerning Arzor at the Centre. They had been exact and colourful, meant to entice settlers to the frontier world. But there is a vast difference between even a cleverly focused and very lifelike tri-dee and the real thing.

This Norbie was tall by Terran standards, very close to seven feet, looming over Storm himself by close to a full twelve inches. And he was exceedingly lean for his height, with two arms, two legs, regular, even handsome humanoid features, a skin of reddish-yellow not far removed from the shade of Arzoran earth. But there was the one distinctive physical attribute that always centred off-world attention to the forehead at a first meeting between Norbie and alien visitor – the horns! Ivory white, they were about six inches long, curling up and back over the hairless dome of the skull.

Storm tried to keep his eyes from those horns, to concentrate instead on Dort's flying fingers. He must learn finger-talk himself as soon as he could. Then, baffled, he turned his attention to the native's dress and weapons.

A wide band of yoris hide was shaped into a corselet, which covered the Norbie's trunk from armpit to crotch, split at the sides over the curve of the hip to allow free leg movement.

The legs in turn were covered with high-leggined boots not unlike those worn as a protection against the thorn shrubs by the settlers. The corselet was doubled in thickness at the waist by another strip of scaled hide serving as a belt, supporting several pocket pouches decorated with designs made by small red, gold, and blue beads, and the ornamented sheath of a knife close to a sword in length, while in his six-digit hands the hunter carried a weapon Storm already knew. It was longer than any Terran bow he had seen, but it was a bow.

Dress, armour, and ornament were combined in one last article of apparel, a wide collar extending to shoulder point on either side, and almost to the waist in front, fashioned entirely of polished yoris fangs. If those had all been taken by this one Norbie, with only a bow and a knife as weapons, then the hunter would have to be respected in any company of fighting men in the galaxy!

Dort dropped his hands to his saddle horn as the native signed a reply. Then he stiffened as the Norbie set arrow shaft to bowstring with a speed that startled the Terran.

'Look out for your cat!'

Storm hissed Surra's call. She arose out of the masking grass and came to him, the arrow trained upon her unrelentingly. Dort was trying frantic sign-talk. But Storm had his own method of reassurance.

Swinging from the saddle pad, the Terran motioned and Surra moved closer, rubbing with feline affection against his legs. Storm went down on one knee and the cat set her forepaws on his shoulders, touching her nose lightly to his cheek.

3

Storm heard a bird-trill and glanced up to meet the astonished yellow eyes of the Norbie, their vertical pupils expanding visibly. The native spoke again in his thin, sharp twitter, a surprising sound to come from the throat of that large body as his fingers flicked a question at Dort.

'Call in that eagle of yours, too, if you can, Storm. You're makin' a big impression and that can be good for us –'

The Terran scratched Surra under the jaw and behind the ears and then stood up. Spreading his feet a little apart and tensing his shoulders for the shock of Baku's landing weight, he whistled.

Wide wings beat the air as Baku dropped in a series of spectacular turns. But when those powerful talons gripped Storm's shoulder they did not pierce flesh. Under the merciless beams of the Arzor noon sun the blue-black plumage had a metallic sheen, and the patch of bright yellow feathers about the cruel blue-grey curve of the beak stood out as if freshly daubed with paint.

'Saaaa –' The Terran's warning alerted both cat and bird. Feathered head and furred one moved to his signal, and two pairs of predatory, glittering eyes regarded the Norbie with intelligent interest.

'That's done it!' Dort was relieved. 'But keep 'em under control when we go into the camp.'

Storm nodded, staring at the spot where the native had stood only seconds earlier. The Terran prided himself on his own scoutcraft and ability to become a part of the landscape, but this Norbie was better than the best he had ever seen.

'Camp's down on the river bank.' Dort came out of the saddle. 'We walk in. Also –' He drew his stun rod from its holster and fired the ready charge into the air. 'You don't enter with a loaded rod, it's not considered manners –'

Once more Storm followed the settler's direction. Baku took off into the sky and Surra paced a yard or so before them, the tip of her tail twitching now and then to betray her interest in her surroundings. There was the scent of strange cooking and stranger living smells, as well as small sounds, coming up slope.

A Norbie camp was not pitched on formal lines. Lengths of kalma wood, easily shaped when wet and iron stiff when dried, had been bent by each householder to form the framework for a hemisphere tent. The hides stretched over that frame were piebald mixtures patched together from the fruits of the individual family's hunting. Blues of fawn pelts were joined by clever lacing to the silver-yellow scales of young yoris skins, banded in turn with the red fur of river rodents. The largest tent had a complete border about its base and door flap of jewel-bright bird skins set in a pattern of vivid colour.

Storm could see no women as they came down to the cluster of tents. But before each of the dwellings stood Norbie males, young and old, each armed. The scout who had met them on the trail was waiting at the flap of the bird-trimmed lodge.

As if unaware of the silent audience, the off-world men threaded their way to that tent and Dort halted before the chieftain. Storm stood quietly a little behind him, allowing none of his interest in his

surroundings to show. Silently he counted some twenty of the rounded tents, and he knew that each housed a full family, which could number up to fifteen or more natives, since a man married into his wife's clan and joined her family as a younger son until the number of his children increased to make him the head of his own family. Judging by Norbie standards this was a town of some size – of the zamle totem – for a stylized representation of that bird of prey was painted on the name shield before the chieftain's lodge.

'Storm' – Dort spoke softly as his hand signed a greeting to the impassive natives – 'call in that bird of yours again. These are-'

'Zamle clansmen,' the Terran nodded. 'So they'll be favourably impressed by my bird totem?' Again he whistled to summon Baku, bracing himself for the bird's landing. But this time matters were not to go on smoothly. For, as the eagle came, she screamed a challenge in a way unlike her usual manner. And she did not come to Storm, but threw her body back, presenting her ready talons to the tent as if that hide and fur erection were an enemy.

Storm, startled, hurried forward. Baku had grounded now, walking across the open space before the Norbie chieftain in a crouch, her feathers standing up, wings trailing half open on either side of her black body. She was in a red rage, though the Terran could not see what had aroused her. That is – he did not, until a streak of living green burst from the tent in reply to the eagle's scream of challenge. Luckily Storm got there first, catching Baku by the legs before she could strike at her attacker.

Screeching in a frenzy the eagle beat her wings, tried to turn her talons on her handler, while Storm exerted all his strength of shoulder and arm to keep her fast, striving at the same time to enforce his mental control as well as the grip of his hands. The Norbie chief had caught up his own feathered champion and was engaged in a similar battle until one of his clansmen flung a small net over the angry zamle. When the green bird had been bundled back into the tent and Baku had been calmed, Storm tossed her onto his riding pad, confining her with jesses so she could not leave that perch until he freed her.

Breathing hard he turned to find the Norbie chief beside him, intent on the eagle. The native's fingers flew and Dort translated.

'Krotag wants to know if this bird is your totem.'

'It is.' Storm nodded, hoping that that gesture meant the same on Arzor as it had on Terra.

'Storm!' Dort's excitement broke through the control he had kept on his voice. 'Do you have a wound scar you can show in a hurry? Scars mean something here. That will prove you're a warrior according to their standards – as well as a man with a real fightin' totem. The chief may even accept you as an equal.'

If scars would help, the Terran was only too willing to oblige. He jerked at the loosely looped lacing of his shirt, pulling the silky material down to bare his left shoulder and display a ragged white line that marked his meeting with a too alert sentry on a planet whose sun was only a faint star in the Arzor night heavens.

'I am a warrior and my fighting totem has saved my life –' He spoke directly to the Norbie chieftain, as if the other understood and did not need Dort's translation by finger. The other answered in his twittering speech as he moved his hands. Dort grinned.

'You've done it, fella. They'll make drink-talk with us now, seein' as how you're a real warrior.'

Krotag's camp supplied them with five experienced tracker-hunters and Larkin was well pleased, though it was plain the natives considered the stampede as an opportunity graciously arranged for their benefit by the Tall-Ones-Who-Drum-Thunder-in-the-Mountains as a means of adding to their clan wealth in horses.

Now as the riders and the Norbies worked in pairs to bring back the widely scattered animals, it became more and more apparent that Storm had been right in his suggestion that the stampede had been planned. Though even the natives found no identifiable traces of the raiders, it was clear that the horses had been separated into small bands and adroitly concealed in canyons and pocket valleys.

The clues to the identity of the stamperder or stamperders were so conspicuously absent that Storm heard some muttering to the effect that Krotag's men, now virtuously engaged in hunting the mounts, might well have hidden them in the first place, so they could claim the stallion and the three or four footsore mares Larkin promised them for their services.

Storm wondered about that a day or so later as red dust churned up by trampling hoofs arose about him until he pulled to one side of the bunch he was helping to head in to the gather point. The Terran adjusted the scarf he had tied over nose and mouth, watching another rider who was a distant dot, yet plain because of his white horse. That was Coll Bister. And by all rights Storm owed Bister some gratitude, for it was he who had found and brought in Rain, the horse the Terran now rode. But the ex-Commando couldn't find any liking for the man. He was one of those most outspoken against the Norbies and in addition he had shown covert hostility toward Storm, for no reason that the Beast Master could understand.

As usual the Terran had kept aloof in the herd camp, using his animals as an excuse for bedding down a little apart from the others. But his skill with horses had won him more ready acceptance than most off-world newcomers could claim. Larkin had turned over to him the breaking of additional mounts to take the place of work horses lost in the stampede, and the men not out on the hunt often gathered to watch him gentle them.

Had he wanted to, Storm might have enjoyed a favourite's position. His particular gifts, his even temper, and his willingness to carry his share of the tedious herd work, were all qualities the riders could readily appreciate. They were willing to accept Storm's reticence, which had hardened at the Centre into an encasing shell. To the frontiersmen that ancient planet on which their stock had first been bred was an exotic mystery. It was a great tragedy that Terra was now gone, and naturally a Terran would feel it deeply. The death of his home world tended to lend Storm something close to exiled majesty in Arzoran eyes.

Only with Larkin and Dort Lancin did Storm approach a relationship stronger than just the comradeship of the trail. Dort was teaching him finger-talk and pouring out for his benefit all the Norbie lore he himself had absorbed over the years, displaying toward the Terran the proprietorship of the instructor for an apt pupil. With Larkin the bond was horse, a subject on which both men could talk for hours at the night's camp-fire.

So he knew Larkin and Dort and liked them in that pallid way that was the closest he was able to come to friendship with one of his own kind nowadays. But Bister was beginning to present a problem, one which he did not want to face. Not that Storm had any fear of physical combat should the other push his dislike that far. Bister bore all the signs of being a top bully, but in a fair fight – in spite of Bister outweighing and over-towering him – Storm was certain of victory.

In a fair fight – Storm's tongue licked dust from his lips behind his scarf. Why had that thought crossed his

mind? And why did it bother him just now to see Bister sitting there as if waiting for him to ride up?

Although Storm had never pushed a fight, neither had he ever directly avoided trouble when it was necessary to face it – not before. Why didn't he want to come to grips with the problem Bister would present to him sooner or later?

Another rider drew level with Rain and a yellow hand lifted from a braided yoris hide hackamore to sign a greeting. Though the Norbie had followed Storm's example and drawn a scarf over the lower half of his thin face, the Terran recognized Gorgol, youngest of the scouts Larkin had hired.

'Plenty dust –' The native made signs slowly out of courtesy for Storm's beginner's learning. 'Ride dry –'

'Clouds – over mountain – does rain come?' Storm signalled back.

The Norbie's head swung so he could look over his lean shoulder at the red rises now to the east.

'Rain comes – then mud –'

Storm knew that Larkin feared mud. Rain in these wastes, the heavy downpours of spring, could make a sticky morass of all level ground, producing dangerous quagmires.

'You bird totem warrior –' That was a statement, not a question. The Norbie youth rode with an easy grace, matching the pace of his smaller black and white mount to Rain's stride until he cantered beside the Terran as if they were practising such a manoeuvre for some exhibition.

Storm nodded. Gorgol's left hand went to a cord about his own neck on which hung two curved objects, black and shiny. There was a shy self-consciousness about the native as he dropped his hand again to sign:

'I no warrior yet – hunter only. Have been in high peaks and killed an evil flyer –'

Storm asked the proper question in return. 'An evil flyer? I not of this world – I know not evil flyer –'

'Big!' The Norbie's fingers spread to their farthest extent making the sign for great size. 'Bird – evil bird. Hunt horse – hunt Norbie – kill!' His forefinger and thumb scissored in the emphatic sign for sudden and violent death, then rose again to tap the trophies swinging against the corselet which covered his breast.

Storm stretched out his hand in polite question and the boy pulled the thong from his neck, passing it to the Terran for examination. The objects strung on it were plainly a bird's claws. And, using the length of Baku's talons in relation to her thirty-four inches as comparison, the creature that had borne them must indeed have been huge, for each claw measured the length of Storm's hand from wrist to the end of the longest finger. He returned the necklet to its proud owner.

'You great hunter,' Storm nodded vigorously to underline his finger statement. 'Evil flyer must be hard to kill.'

Gorgol's face might be half hidden by the scarf mask, but his whole person expressed pleasure as he answered.

'I kill for man deed. Not warrior yet – but hunter, yes.'



And well he might boast, Storm thought. If this boy had killed the monster he described while hunting alone – and the Terran had learned enough of Norbie customs from Dort to know that idle boasting was no part of native character – he had every right in the world to claim to be a hunter.

'You be frawn herder?' the Norbie continued.

'No. I have no land – no herd –'

'Be hunter. Kill evil flyer – kill yoris – trade their skins –'

'I stranger,' Storm pointed out, making the signs slowly as he launched bravely into expressing more complicated ideas. 'Norbies hunt Norbie lands – off-world men do not so hunt –'

The hunting law was one of the few rigidly enforced by the loosely knit government of Arzor, as the Terran had been warned at the Centre and again at the space port. Norbie rights were protected. Herd riders could kill yoris or other predatory creatures attacking their stock. But any animal living in the mountains, or in the native-held sections of the plains was taboo as far as the settlers were concerned.

Gorgol objected. 'You bird totem warrior – Krotag's people bird totem – you hunt Krotag's land – no one say no –'

Far within Storm a feeling stirred faintly, some emotion, frozen on that day when he had returned from a hazardous three months of duty behind the enemy lines to discover that he was a homeless man. He moved restlessly on the saddle pad and Rain snorted nervously, as if the stallion, too, had felt that painful tug. The Terran's face, beneath his mask, was set in passionless endurance as he fought against that feeble response to Gorgol's impulsive offer.

'You're pullin' it late –' Bister's dust-hoarsened voice rasped not only on Storm's ears but on his awakened nerves. 'Sure got you a big bunch this time. The goat here lead you to where he had 'em all salted away nice and neat?'

That new aliveness in Storm rose in answer to the prod of antagonism. He did not like Bister, but he no longer accepted that passively as just another unpleasant fact of his present existence. There might be cause for him to do something positive to counter the other's needling. The Terran did not know that over the edge of the scarf his eyes, usually better controlled, now gave him away. Coll Bister was more alert to small points than he seemed.

The settler pulled his own scarf away from his mouth and spat. 'Maybe you don't believe these goats have brains enough to plan it all out – eh?'

Storm was more interested in the idle swing of Bister's right hand. A quirt dragged from the man's thick wrist, a quirt with an extra-long length of a doubled yoris-hide lash.

'We wouldn't have found as many horses as we have if Krotag's men weren't nosing them out for us.' Storm's position on the riding pad looked lazy, his hands were well away from the weapons at his belt. But he sensed, with a good moment's grace in which to act, what was coming, as if he had sucked that knowledge out of the air along with the grit and dust.

That dangling right arm rose as the last straggler of the stray bunch trotted by. It could be that Bister was aiming to snap his quirt at the tired yearling. But Storm did not believe that. A sudden pressure of knee sent Rain forward so that the yoris-hide strap did not strike Gorgol's bare thigh, but landed in a stinging

slap on Storm's own better protected leg.

Bister had not been prepared for that, nor for what happened next. Storm's well-timed retaliation sent the bigger man to the ground – the arm that had wielded the quirt temporarily numb to the elbow. With an inarticulate roar of rage Bister struggled to his feet only to go down again, sent sprawling by a Commando blow delivered by the edge of Storm's open hand. The Terran had thought out his strategy in advance.

To his surprise Bister did not get up to rush him again. Instead when the big man did rise to his feet he stood still, his chest heaving, his face flushed, but making no move to continue the fight.

'We're not through –' he spat. 'I've heard about you, Storm. You Commandos can kill a man with your bare hands. All right. Wait until we get to the Crossin' and let's see you stand up to a stun meetin'! I'm not done with you – nor with those goat pals of yours neither!'

Storm was bewildered enough to be shaken out of some of his self-confident complacency. Bister's restraint now did not fit into the type of character he appeared to be. Neither, Storm was certain, was it a case of the Arzoran rider being just all bluster and no bite. Looking down at that flushed face, into the dark eyes raised to his, Storm wondered if he had completely misread Coll Bister. The man was not in the least afraid, he was confident – and he hated! So why had he refused to continue to fight now? The Terran watched the other swing up into the saddle. He would allow Bister to call the next move in the game – until he learned more about the stakes.

'Remember –' Bister's fingers were busy with his face scarf, ready to jerk the mask up over his square jaw once again – 'we aren't through –'

Storm shrugged. Bister doubtless could bear watching, but there was no advantage to be gained from allowing the other to think so.

'Ride your side of the trail,' he returned shortly, 'and I'll ride mine, Bister. I'm not out to rope trouble.'

The other cantered off and Storm turned to find Gorgol watching that retreat. The Norbie drew level with the Terran once more and his eyes held an unmistakable note of inquiry as he signed:

'He challenged but he did not fight – why?'

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Storm said and then made more halting finger-talk. 'I know not. But he does not like Norbies –' He thought it best to give a warning that might save the boy future trouble with the trail bully.

'So do we know. He thinks we steal horses – hide and then find them for Larkin. Maybe that good trick for Nitra – for wild men of the Peaks. Not for Krotag's men. We make bargain with Larkin – we keep bargain.'

'Somebody hid those horses, made yoris come to stampede,' Storm observed.

'That true. Maybe outlaws. Many outlaws in mountains. Not Norbies, but raid on Norbie land. Norbie fight – kill!'

Gorgol sent his horse on after the disappearing bunch of strays and Storm followed at a slower pace. The Terran had his own motive for coming to Arzor, for riding into this Basin country. He certainly did not

want to become involved in others' quarrels. Larkin's stampede had just happened and Storm could do no less than help the trader out, but he was not going to pursue his trouble with Bister, or get pulled into any fight between the settlers and the Norbies.

The threatened rain broke upon them with a wild drumming of thunder that evening. After its first fury it turned into a steady, drenching downpour. And from then on Larkin's riders had little time to think of anything except the troubles of the trail.

Surra crawled under a tarp on the wagon to join the meerkats, growling her stubborn refusal for any venture into the wet, and even Baku sought shelter. This steady fall of moisture was beyond the team's past experience and they resented it, a state of mind Storm came to share as, ankle deep in mud, he helped to fill the softer spots of the trail with branches and grass, or rode into the swirling waters of a river to rope and guide loose horses along a line of stakes the Norbies had set up to mark a questionable ford.

By the end of the second day of rain the Terran was sure they could not have advanced a mile without the aid of the native scouts. The mud did not seem to tire the Norbies' wiry, range-bred horses, though it constantly entrapped the off-world stock. The natives did not display any weariness either as they dashed about ready with a dragrope or an armload of brush to fill in a bad mudhole.

But on the third day it began to clear, and word was passed that two more days' travel should bring them into the auction town – news they all greeted with relief.

4

The soil had absorbed water like a sponge. Now the heavy heat of the sun drew out in return luxuriant foliage such as Storm would not have guessed this waste could produce. The horses had to be restrained from grazing lest they founder. And the Terran also needed to keep close watch on Ho and King who relished digging in the easily excavated earth. It was almost impossible to believe that after six more weeks of such plenty this country would again be close to desert.

'Pretty, eh?' Dort set his mount to climb a small hillock, joining Storm. The yellow-green ground blanket ahead was patterned with drifts of white, golden, and scarlet flowers. 'But wait a month or so and' – he snapped his fingers – 'all dried and gone. Just sand and rocks, some of the thorn bushes, and the rest a lot of nothing. Fastest changing country you ever saw!'

'Surely the grazing can't disappear that fast in the Basin. Or do you have to move the fawn herds continually?'

'No. Give any of this land water and it'll grow all you need. There's year 'round water in the Basin, and a different kind of grass with long tough roots. You can drive a trail herd through here spring and fall. But you can't hold animals on range in this district. Prawns are big eaters, too – need a wide range. My dad has seventy squares and he runs about two thousand head on 'em 'round the year.'

'You were born on Arzor, Dort?' Storm asked his first personal question.

'Sure was! My dad had a little spread down Quipawa way then. He was born here, too. We're First Ship people,' he ended with a flash of pride. 'Three generations here now and there're five spreads runnin' under our ear notch – my dad's, me an' my brother's, my sister and her man's over in the peninsula country, my Uncle Wagger and his two sons – they have theirs, the Borggy and the Rifts, over on the Cormbal Slopes.'

'A good world to come back to –' Storm's gaze swept over the level land eastward to those mountains that had called him since he had first sighted them.

'Yes.' Dort glanced at Storm and then quickly away again. 'It's good country – wide. A man can ride free here. Me – when I was in the forces and saw Grambage and Wolf Three and some of those other worlds where people live all stuck together – well, it wouldn't suit me.' Then, as if his curiosity pushed him past politeness, he said:

'Seems like you knew a country like this once, you act right at home –'

'I did – once. Not the same colours – but desert and mountains, short springs to make a waste bloom – dry, dead summers – hot sun – open range –'

That burn-off wasn't war – it was plain murder!' Dort's face was flushed, anger against the irredeemable past alight in his eyes.

Storm shrugged. 'It is done now.' He lifted his reins and the stallion single-footed it down the other side of the hillock.

'Say, kid,' Dort caught up with him again, 'you've heard about the land grants open for veterans –'

'I was told – ten squares to a qualified settler.'

'Twenty to a Terran,' the other corrected. 'Now me and my brother, we've got us a nice spread on the eastern fork of the Staffa and beyond that the land is clear to the Paszo Peaks. If you aren't going to stay on with Larkin and run herd, you might ride on with me and take a look in that direction. It's good country – dry around the edges maybe – but the Staffa doesn't give out even in high-sun season. You could bite out your twenty squares clear up to the Peaks. Quade has a section there –'

'Brad Quade? I thought his holdings were in the Basin –'

'Oh, that's his big spread. He's First Ship family, too, though he did a hitch in Survey and has gone off-world other times. He's imported horses and tried Terran sheep here. Sheep didn't last, the groble beetles infected them the first year. Anyway, he set up the Peak place for his son –'

'His son?' Storm's dark face remained expressionless, but he was listening very closely now.

'Yes. Logan's just a kid and he and Brad don't rub along together too smooth. The kid doesn't like just herding – goes off with the Norbies a lot and is as good as one of their scouts at tracking. He tried to get in the forces here, raised merry Hades down at the enlistment centre when they wouldn't take him because of his age. So Brad gave him this wilder grant down at the Peaks about two years ago and told him to take out his fight on taming that. Haven't heard how he's made out lately.' Dort laughed. 'Home news took a while catching up with our outfit while we were star shootin!'

'Hey!' Larkin's shout was a summons to them both. 'Ride circle, you two, we want them bedded down here –'

Storm rode to the right while Dort took the left. To bed down here meant they would wait to hit the Crossing late tomorrow. Larkin wanted to rest the horses before the auction. As he rode, the Terran was thinking. So Brad Quade had a son, had he, a fact which altered Storm's plans somewhat. He had been

willing to confront Quade where and when he found him and have their quarrel out. He still wanted to see Quade, of course he did! Why did the fact that his enemy had a family make any difference? Storm pushed that last puzzle to a dead end without solving it.

He carried through his duties with his usual competence, glad to be busy. The rest of the men were in a festive mood. Even the Norbies twittered among themselves and made no move to leave the camp after they collected their pay. Here the party would split up – the veterans who had joined for the trip at the space port would now ride on to their own spreads or light and tie for the big owners who were coming to buy at the auction, which was also an informal hiring depot. This was one of the two big yearly gatherings that broke the usual solitude of the range seasons, and was a mixture of business, fair, and carnival, attracting the whole countryside.

'Storm.' Larkin sat down by the Terran where he was settled cross-legged near the fire, the meerkats wrestling playfully before him, Surra lazily tonguing her paws at his back. 'You planning to take up land? Law gives you rights to a nice piece –'

'Not now. Dort was talking about the Staffa River country – running up to the Peaks. I may ride on to see it –' One excuse for remaining foot-loose was as good as another, the Terran thought wearily.

Larkin brightened. 'That's good grazin' land – the Peak country. I've been thinkin' some of that lately myself. Me, I've been doin' pretty well at importin' horses. But there aren't goin' to be many more brought in from off-world. Sure, we can buy 'em like these – or other fancy stuff from Argol. But that's a lighter breed, not suited to range work. The old Terran stock is gone. So I've a plan runnin' around in my head. I'd like to round me up some good basic stock – some of these we got right out here in the herd, and some range stuff of at least two generations Arzoran breeding, plus a few mounts out of the Norbie camps. Mix 'em and see what I can do 'bout buildin' up a new strain – a horse that needs less water, can live off scrub-feed ground, and follow a fawn drift without givin' out at the end of one day's trottin'. Now, son, you're a master hand with animals. You ride down there and cast an eye over the Peak country. If you're willin' – look me up here at the fall auction and we'll see about a partnership deal –'

Again that tug deep inside, a blow at the wall he had built around himself. Three times now Storm had been offered a possible future – by Gorgol, by Dort, and now by Larkin. He shifted slightly and used the evasive tactics he had developed as protective armour at the Centre.

'Let me see the land first, Larkin. We can talk it over in the fall-'

But long before fall he should meet with Brad Quade – Brad Quade and maybe his son Logan into the bargain.

Partly to get away from his own thoughts, Storm allowed Dort to persuade him to visit the Crossing at night, leaving his team in camp and riding with Lancin and Ransford into a town that made him blink a little, it was so unlike other villages.

Arzoran settlements such as this one were almost a hundred Terran years old now. Yet there was a kind of raw newness about them that Storm had not seen elsewhere. Between the half-yearly explosions of auction week, Irrawady Crossing was close to a ghost town, though it was the only village in several thousand squares of range land. Tonight the town was roaring, wide open. Life here was certainly far removed from the peace Storm had known on Terra, or the regimentation and discipline of the Centre.

The four from the trail camp had no more than stabled their horses when they witnessed the end of a personal argument, both men having drawn stun rods with speed enough to drop each other flat and

unconscious. And they skirted another crowd moments later, watching another dispute being settled bloodily by fists.

'Boys playful tonight, aren't they?' inquired Dort, grinning.

'Anybody here ever try to activate a stun gun with a blast bolt?' Storm asked. He was astonished at the grim chill of Ransford's reply.

'Sure – that's been done – by outlaws. But any fella who tried to blast wouldn't last long. We don't hold with murder. If the boys want to play rough with a stun – and that sure leaves an almighty headache to follow a guy for hours – or try to change another fella's looks with fists, that's their right. But blastin's out!'

'I saw a couple of riders mix it up with Norbie long-knives once,' volunteered Dort. That was a nasty mess and the winner was sent down to Istabu for psychin'. 'Course Norbies duel it out to the death when they give a "warrior" challenge. But that's accordin' to their customs and we don't bother 'em about it. Nobody is allowed to interfere with the tribes –'

Ransford nodded. Tribe wars are somethin' like religion to a Norbie. A boy has to get him a scar in personal combat before he can take a wife or speak up in council. There's a regular system of points for a man to gather 'fore he can be a chief –all pretty complicated. Hey, fella, take it easy!'

A man caromed into Dort, nearly carrying the veteran off his feet. Dort fended him off with a good-natured shove. But the other whirled, moving with better coordination than his weaving progress predicted. Storm went into action as the rod came from the other's holster, not trained at the bewildered Dort, but directly at Storm.

The ex-Commando moved with trained precision. His rising hand struck the man's wrist, sending the stun rod flying before a finger could press the firing button. But the other was not licked. With a tight little strut he bounced forward, to meet a whirlwind attack. The stranger was out on his feet before any of the men passing really understood that a scuffle was in progress.

Storm, breathing a little faster, stood rubbing one hand against the other, looking down at the now unconscious rider. Did local etiquette demand that he now dispose of his late opponent in some manner, he wondered. Or did one just leave a loser where he fell?

He stooped, hooked his hands in the slumberer's armpits, and dragged him with some difficulty – since he was a large man and now a dead weight – to prop him against the side of a neighbouring building. As the Terran straightened up he saw a shadowy figure in the dusk turn and walk abruptly away. There was no mistaking Bister's outline as he passed the garish lights of a café. Had this rider been sent against Storm by Bister? And why couldn't, or didn't, Coll Bister fight his own battles?

'By the Great Horns!' Dort bore down on him. 'What did you do then? Looked as if you only patted him gentle like, until he went all limp and keeled over like a rayed man! Only you didn't pull your rod at all.'

'Short and quick,' commented Ransford. 'Commando stuff?'

'Yes.'

But Ransford showed none of Dort's excitement. Take it easy, kid,' he warned. 'Make a parade of bein' a tough man and a lot of these riders may line up to take you on. We don't use blasters maybe, but a man can get a pretty bad poundin' if a whole gang moves in on him – no matter how good he is with his hands

—'

'When have you ever seen the kid walkin' stiff-legged for a fight?' Dort protested. 'Easiest-goin' fella in camp, an' you know it! Why did you jump that guy anyway, Storm?'

'His eyes,' the Terran replied briefly. 'He wanted to make it a real fight.'

Ransford agreed. 'Had his rod out too quick, Dort, and he pulled it for the kid, too. He was pushin'. Only don't push back unless you have to, Storm.'

'Aw, leave the kid alone, Ranny. When did he ever make fight-talk on the fingers?'

Ransford chuckled. 'It wasn't the fingers he used for his fight-talk – mostly the flat of his hand. I'm just warnin' him. This is a hot town tonight and you're from off-world, Storm. There're a lot of chesty riders who like to pick on newcomers.'

Storm smiled. That I'm used to. But thanks, Ransford, I'll walk softly. I never have fought for the fun of it.'

That's just it, kid, might be better if you did. Leave you alone and you're as nice and peaceful as that big cat of yours. But I don't think she'd take kindly to anyone stampin' on her tail, casual-like. Well, here's the Gatherin'. Do we want to see who's in town tonight?'

Lights, brighter than the illumination of the street, and a great deal of noise issued out of the doorway before them. The structure assembled under one roof, Storm gathered, all the amenities of bar, theatre, club, and market exchange, and was the meeting place for the more respectable section of the male population – regular and visiting – of Irrawady Crossing.

The din, the lights, the assorted smells of cooking, drinks, and horse, as well as heated humanity, struck hard as they crossed the threshold. Nothing he saw there attracted Storm and had he been alone he would have returned to the camp. But Dort wormed a path through the crowd, boring toward the long table where a game of Kor-sal-slam was in progress, eager to try his luck at the game of chance that had swept through the Confed worlds with the speed of light during the past two years.

'Ransford! When did you get back?'

Storm saw a hand drop on the veteran's shoulder, half turning him to face the speaker. It was a hand almost as brown as his own. And above it, around that equally brown wrist –! Storm did not betray the shock he felt. There was only one place that particular ornament could come from. For it was the ketoh of the Dineh – the man's bracelet of his own people developed from the old bow-guard of the Navajo warrior! And what was it doing about the wrist of an Arzoran settler?

Without realizing that he was unconsciously preparing for battle, the Terran moved his feet a little apart, bracing and balancing his body for either attack or defence, as his eyes moved along the arm, clothed conventionally in fawn fabric, up to the face of the man who wore the ketoh. The stranger and Ransford had drawn a little apart, and now in his turn Storm shifted back against the wall, wanting to watch them without being himself observed.

The face of the settler was as brown as his hand – a weather-burned brown. But his were not Navajo features – though the hair above them was as black as Storm's own. And it was a strong, attractive face with lines of good humour bracketing the wide mouth, softening the almost too-firm line of the jaw, while

the eyes set beneath rather thick brows were a deep blue.

Storm was not too far away to hear Ransford's return cry of 'Quade!'

He had caught the hand from his shoulder and was shaking it vigorously. 'I just got in, rode herd for Larkin down from the Port. Say, Brad, he's got some good stuff in his new stud string –'

The wide mouth curved into a smile. 'Now that's news, Ranny. But we're glad to have you back, fella, and in one unbroken piece. Heard a lot of black talk about how bad things were going out there – toward the end –'

'Our Arzor outfit got into it late. Just one big battle and some moppin' up. Say – Brad, I want you to meet –'

But Storm took two swift steps backward, to be hidden by a push of newcomers, and Ransford could not see him. For once it was useful to be smaller than the settler breed.

'Queer –' The veteran's voice carried puzzlement. 'He was right here behind me. Off-worlder and a good kid. Rode herd down for Larkin and can he handle horses! Terran –'

'Terran!' repeated Quade, his smile gone. Those dirty Xiks! His words became highly flavoured and combined some new expressions Storm did not recognize. All worlds, it seemed, developed their own brand of profanity. 'I only hope the devils who planned that burn-off were cooked in their turn – to a crisp! Your man deserves every break we can give him. I'll look him up – any good horseman is an asset. I hear you're going out to the Vakind –'

They moved on but Storm remained where he was, surprised and not a little ashamed to find that the hands resting on the belt about his flat middle were trembling a little.

A meeting such as this did not match with the nebulous plans he had made. He wanted no curious audience when he met Quade – and then each of them should have a blaster – or better still – knives! Storm's settlement with his man must not be one of the relatively bloodless encounters of Arzoran custom but something far more decisive and fatal.

The Terran was about to go out when a bull-throated roar rising above the clamour in the room halted him.

'Quade!' The man who voiced that angry bellow made Brad Quade seem almost as slender as a Norbie.

'Yes, Dumaroy?' The warmth that had been in his voice while he spoke with Ransford was gone. Storm had heard such a tone during his service days – that inflection meant trouble. He stayed to watch with a curiosity he could not control.

'Quade – that half-baked kid of yours has been ridin' wild again – stickin' his nose in where it isn't wanted. You pull herd guard on him, or someone's goin' to do it for you!'

That someone being you, Dumaroy?' The ice thickened into a glacial deposit.

'Maybe. He roughed up one of my boys out on the Peak Range –'

'Dumaroy!' There was the snap of a quirt in that and the whole room was silent, men edging in about the



two as if they expected some open fight. 'Dumaroy, your rider roughed up a Norbie and he got just what he deserved in return. You know what trouble with the natives can lead to – or do you want to have a knife feud sworn on you?'

'Norbies!' Dumaroy did not quite spit, but his disgust was made eloquently plain. 'We don't nurse Norbies on my spread. And we don't take kindly to half-broke kids settin' up to tell us how to act. Maybe you goat-lovers up here like to play finger-wriggle with the big horns – We don't, and we don't trust 'em either –'

'A knife feud –'

Dumaroy interrupted. 'So they swear a knife feud. And how long will that last if my boys clean out their camps and teach 'em a good lesson? Those goats run fast enough when you show your teeth at 'em. They sure have the finger-sign on you up here –'

Quade's hand shot out, buried fingers in the fawn fabric that strained across the other's wide chest.

'Dumaroy –' He still spoke quietly. 'Up here we hold to the law. We don't follow Mountain Butcher tricks. If the Peak country needs a little visit from the Peace Officers, be sure it's going to get just that!'

'Better change your rods to blast charges if you ride on another man's range to snoop.' Dumaroy twisted out of the other's hold with a roll of his thick shoulders.

'We tend to our own business and we don't take to meddlers from up here. If you don't want to have your pet goats tickled up some, give them the sign to keep away from our ranges. And they'd better not trail any loose stock with 'em either! And, if I were you, Quade, I'd speak loud and clear to that kid of yours. When Norbies get excited, they don't always look too close at a man's face before they plant an arrow in his middle. I'm serving notice here and now' – his glance swept from Quade to the other men about him – 'the Peaks aren't goin' to be ruled from the Basin. If you don't like our ways – stay out! You don't know what's goin' on back in the hills. These tame goats who ride herd around here aren't like the high-top clans. And maybe the tame ones will learn a few lessons from the wild ones. Been a lot of herd losses in the last five months-and that Nitra chief, old Muccag, he's been makin' drum-magic in the mountains. I say somethin' bigger than a tribe war is cookin'. And we ain't goin' to have goats camped on our ranges when the arrow is passed! If you've any sense, the rest of you, you'd think that way too.'

Storm was puzzled. This had begun as a personal quarrel between Quade and Dumaroy. Now the latter was attempting to turn the encounter into an argument against the natives. It was almost as strange as Bister's early actions. He sensed an undercurrent that spelled danger.

5

The Terran was so intrigued by that problem that he did not see Quade turn until he was aware, suddenly, that the Basin settler was staring at him. Those blue eyes were searching, oddly demanding, and there was a shadow of something that might have been recognition in them. Of course that was impossible. To his knowledge he and Quade had never met. But Arzoran was coming toward him and Storm stepped back, confident that outside in the half-light of the street the other could not find him unless he willed it.

But Storm did not move so fast that a startled cry of warning did not reach him. Had it not been for that call and perhaps the fact that his attacker was overeager, the Terran might have gone down with a Norbie long-knife driven home between his shoulders, to cough out his life in the dusty roadway. But the

ex-Commando had lived long enough under constant danger so that once more his reflexes took over, and he dived to the right, bringing up against the wall of a building, as someone rushed past him. That half-seen figure flashed into the obscuring dark of an alleyway, but the light reflected from a naked blade as he went.

'Did he get you?'

Storm swung around, his hand on his own knife hilt. The light from the Gatherin' showed him Brad Quade standing there.

'Saw that knife swing,' Quade elaborated. 'Did he mark you?' Storm stood away from the wall. 'Not at all,' he answered in the same gentle voice he had used at the Centre. 'I have to thank you, sir.'

'I'm Brad Quade. And you?'

But Storm could not force himself to take the hand the other held out to him. This was all wrong and he could not go ahead with a scene differing so far from the one he had visualized all these years. He had been pushed off base and he had to get fast, no matter how many would-be assassins lurked in the alley mouths of Irrawady Crossing. Would his name mean anything to Quade? He doubted it, but he could not really be sure. Yet he could not give a false one. His quarrel with this man was not one to be cloaked with tricks and lies.

'I'm Storm,' he replied simply, and bowed, hoping that the other would believe the meeting of hands was not a greeting custom of his kind, since manners varied widely from planet to planet and his accent ruled him off-world.

'You're Terran!'

Quade was too quick, yet again Storm could not bring himself to deny anything.

'Yes.'

'Quade! Hey, Brad Quade! You're wanted on the corn-talk –' a man hailed from the door of the Gatherin'. As the settler looked around Storm faded away. He was sure the other would not pursue him through the town.

Carefully, with attention alerted to any pitfalls or possible ambush sites ahead, Storm went back to the stable. But he did not breathe easily until he was mounted on Rain and riding out of the Crossing with the firm intention of keeping away from that town in the future.

Months before he had worked out an imagined meeting with Quade to the last tiny detail, a very satisfactory meeting. He, Storm, would select the proper time and place, make his accusation – to a man who did not fit the pattern of the Brad Quade he had seen tonight. This Quade was not at all the passive villain he had pictured him to be.

And their business could not be transacted on the crowded street of a frontier town just after Quade had probably saved his life. He wanted – he had to have – his own kind of a meeting.

Storm shied from following that line of reasoning. He did not honestly know why he had run – yes, he had run – from Quade tonight. He had come to Arzor only to meet Quade – but which Quade, the figure he had created to justify his action, or the man he had met? His actions were becoming as hard to

understand as Bister's –

No, Storm's heel touched Rain and the horse obediently broke into a gallop. There was nothing wrong with his motives – Quade deserved what Storm had to bring him. What if the settler's warning had saved his life? It wasn't any personal wrong of his own he had come to avenge – he could not cancel Quade's debt to the dead!

But the Terran did not sleep well that night, and he volunteered as a herd-holder as Larkin took the first of the string in to the crossing for showing in the morning. It was midday when the trader returned, well satisfied with the morning's sales. And he brought a stranger with him.

Though Storm did not know the man, the earth-brown uniform he wore was familiar enough, being that of Survey. And he had met other men of that service, had studied under them, in the training camp of the Beast Masters. Nor was he greatly surprised when Larkin beckoned him over.

'Sorenson, archaeologist,' the Survey man introduced himself, the crisp galactic speech overlaid with the faint lisp of a Lydian-born.

'Storm, Beast Master, retired –' the Terran replied as formally. 'What can I do for you, Specialist Sorenson?'

'According to Larkin you haven't signed up with any outfit yet and you don't plan to apply for a land grant just at present. Are you free for a scout engagement?'

'I'm off-world, new here,' Storm pointed out. But he was excited, this was a perfect answer to his immediate problems. 'I don't know the country –'

Sorenson shrugged. 'I've Norbie guides, a settler pack master. But Larkin tells me you have kept your team intact – I know the work such a team can do and I can use you –'

'I have my team, yes –' Storm nodded toward his bedroll. Surra sprawled there, blinking in the sun, the meerkats chittering beside her, while Baku perched on the rim of the supply cart. 'Dune cat, meerkats, African eagle –'

'Good enough.' Sorenson only glanced at the animals. 'We're heading into desert country. Have you heard of the Sealed Caves? There is a chance they may be located down in the Peak section.'

'I've heard, also, that they are a legend.'

'We got a little more accurate information recently. That territory's largely unmapped and your services will be useful. We have a government permit for pot-hunting.'

'Sounds like a good deal, kid,' Larkin spoke up. 'You wanted to look over the Peaks. You'll get your pay from me in horses –and you can either sell 'em at auction or you can keep that stallion you've been riding and take the black pack mare for your gear, and let me put up the other two. If you find a likely range down there, stick up your stakes and register it when you come back –'

'Also, you can take your scout pay in a government land voucher,' Sorenson added quickly. 'Useful if you want to stake out in new country. Or use it for an import permit –'

Storm stirred. He felt pushed, and that aroused opposition. On the other hand, the expedition would take

him away from the Crossing and from both the knifer – whoever he might be – and Quade until he could decide about the latter. Also – the Peak country held Logan Quade and he wanted to know more about that young man.

'All right,' he agreed, and then instantly wished that he had not, but it was too late.

'Sorry to hurry you, Storm' – Sorenson was all brisk efficiency now – 'only we pull out early tomorrow morning. The mountain rains won't last too much longer and we have to count on them for our water supply. That's pretty arid country up there and we'll have to leave it anyway at the beginning of the big dry. Bring your own camp kit – we will furnish the rest of the supplies –'

Over Sorenson's thin shoulder Storm caught sight of a pair of riders rounding the wagon. Ransford – and Brad Quade! At the moment they were looking at the horses, but a slight turn of the head would bring Storm into the settler's line of vision.

'Where do I meet you to move out?' the Terran asked quickly.

'East of town, by the river ford – that grove of yarvins, about five –'

'I'll be there,' Storm promised and then spoke to Larkin. 'I'll keep Rain and the mare as you suggest. We'll settle for the auction price of the others when I get back.'

Larkin was grinning happily as the Survey man left. 'Keep your eyes open around the Peaks, son, and stake a good stretch of land. Give us three-four years and we'll have us some colts that'll beat anything even imported from Terra! That pack mare – she's the best of the lot for a rough trip, steady old girl. Any of your kit you want to store, just leave it in the wagon, I'll see to it –'

Storm was too impatient to wonder at Larkin's helpfulness. He wanted to be out of sight before Quade came away from the improvised corral. But escape was not to be so easily achieved. It was Ransford who hailed him.

'Storm!' That shout was so imperative the Terran dared not ignore it and waited for the other to come up. 'Look here, kid, Quade told me about your being jumped by a knife-man in town – what kind of trouble are you in anyway?'

'None – that I know of –'

But the other was frowning. 'I tried to find out somethin' about that rider you put to sleep – but nobody knew him. Sure it wasn't him waitin' for you?'

'Might have been – I just sighted a shadow with a knife – never saw his face,' Storm longed to get away. Quade was dismounting and he was sure the settler would join them.

'I put Dort to askin' around some,' Ransford continued. 'He knows men in about nine-tenths of the outfits here for the auction. If anyone is out to get your hide, he'll hear about it – then we can take some action ourselves –'

Why was everyone so interested in his affairs? Storm wanted desperately, at that moment, to snake Rain out of the picket lines, call his team, and ride off alone into the wilderness. He did not want such solicitude, in fact it scraped raw some nerve he had not known he possessed. He asked nothing but to be left alone, to go his own way. Yet here was Larkin – and Ransford – and Dort – and even the Norbie,

Gorgol, all with splendid little plans, or concern, or helpful hints for him. Storm could not understand why – any more than he knew why Bister wanted to make trouble for him.

'If anyone is gunning for me,' he returned as well as he could without betraying his rising irritation, 'it won't do him any good after tomorrow morning. I've signed up as scout for a Survey expedition and am leaving town.'

Ransford gave a sigh of relief. 'That's usin' your head, kid. Maybe this hothead got a skinful of tharman juice last night and when he sobers up he'll have forgotten all about it. Which way you headed?'

'To the Peaks.'

The Peaks – That echo came from Quade. Then the settler added in a language Storm had never thought to hear another speak again:

'Where do you ride, man of the Dineh?'

'I do not understand you,' Storm answered in galactic one-speech.

Quade shook his head, his blue eyes measuring Storm astutely.

'You are Terran,' he switched to the common tongue of the spaceways, 'but also you are Navajo –'

'I am Terran – now a man of no planet,' Storm replied shortly. 'I do not understand you.'

'I think that you do,' Quade countered, but there was no abruptness in that, only a kind of regret. 'I overheard you saying that you had signed on as a scout with an expedition into the Peak country. That's good land down there – look it over. My son has a holding in that district.' His eyes dropped to his hands, twisting his reins. 'If you see him –' But Quade did not finish that sentence, ending with another suggestion altogether. 'I'd like him to meet you – you are Terran and Navajo. Well, good luck, Storm. If you ever need anything, try my range.' His foot was already in the stirrup and he swung into the saddle, moving off before the Terran could answer – if he had wanted to.

'If you do see Logan,' Ransford broke the silence, 'I hope he's not in trouble up to his chin. That boy's as hard to ride herd on as a pack of yoris! Pity – Quade's the easiest man livin' to rub along with – if you're straight and doin' your job right. But he and his own kid can't be together more'n a week before fire's bustin' out all over the range! Nobody can understand why. Logan Quade's crazy about huntin', and he with the Norbies a lot. But the kid never did a crooked thing in his life and he's as decent as his old man. They just can't seem to live together. It's a shame, 'cause Quade is proud of the boy and wants his son for a partner. If you hear anything good about the kid, tell Quade when you come back – it'll mean a lot to him – and he's taken a big likin' to you, too. Well, good luck, kid – sounds as if you've got yourself a good deal. Survey pays well and you can turn their write-off in for an import permit or somethin' like.'

Storm was disturbed. He wanted none of the information Ransford had supplied. What did Quade's personal affairs matter to him? In that second brief encounter with his chosen enemy he felt he had lost some advantage he needed badly as a bolster for the future. He had accepted Quade, the enemy, but this other Quade was infringing more and more on his carefully built-up image. He hurried about his preparations for the trip, thankful for the occupation.

Surra sat on his left, the meerkats snuffled, poked, and pried under and around his busy hands as Storm sorted, piled, and made up two packs of his personal belongings. One he must leave with Larkin, the

other comprised the kit he would need on the trail. There remained now just one small bundle to explore.

He had left that roll to the last, doubly reluctant to slit the waterproof covering sewed about it on another world, keeping its contents intact for two years. Now Storm sat quietly, his hands resting palm down upon the package, his eyes closed, exploring old roads of memory – roads he had managed to avoid exploring at the Centre. As long as he did not cut the waxed cord, as long as he did not actually see what he was sure must be inside – just so long was he in a way free of the last acceptance of defeat – of acknowledging that there was never to be any return.

What did these men of another race here in camp – or those in the town – or those at the Centre who had watched him so narrowly for months – that Commander who had so reluctantly stamped his freedom papers – what did any of them know of the voices of the Old Ones and how they could come to a man?

How could they understand a man such as his grandfather – a Singer learned in ancient ways, following paths of belief these other races had never walked, who could see things not to be seen, hear things that no others could hear?

Between Storm and the clear beliefs of his grandfather – that grandfather who had surrendered him to schooling as a government ward only under force – there was a curtain of white man's learning. Good and bad, he had had to accept the new in gulps, unable to pick and choose until he was old enough to realize that behind the outer façade of acceptance he could make his own selection. And by that time it was almost too late, he had strayed far from the source of his people's inner strength. Twice after he had been taken away by the authorities, Storm had returned to his people, once as a boy, again as a youth before he left Terra on active service. But then always between him and Na-Ta-Hay's teaching there had been the drift of new ways. Fiercely opposed to those, his grandfather had been almost hostile, grudging, when Storm had tried to recapture a little of the past for himself. Yet some of it had clung, for now there sang through his mind old words, older music, things half-remembered, which stirred him as the wind from the mountains whipped him outwardly, and his lips shaped words not to sound again on the world from which this bundle had been sent.

Slowly, Storm sawed through the tough cord. He must face this now. The outer wrappings peeled off, and Ho and Hing crowded in with their usual curiosity, intrigued by the strange new smells clinging to the contents.

For there were scents imprisoned here – he could not be imagining that. The tightly woven wool of the blanket rasped his fingers, he saw and yet did not want to see the stripes of its pattern, red, white, blue-black, serrated concentric designs interrupting them. And to its tightly creased folds clung the unmistakable aroma of the hogan – sheep smell, desert smell, dust and sand smell. Storm sucked it into his lungs, remembering.

He shook out the blanket, and metal gleamed up at him as he thought it might. Necklace – blue-green of turquoise and dull sheen of silver – ketoh bracelet, concha belt – all masterpieces of the smith's art – the ceremonial jewellery of a Dineh warrior. Old, old pieces he had seen before, made by brown fingers, dust long before he had been born – the designs created by the artists of his race.

Seeing those, Storm knew he had been right in his surmise. Not only had Grandfather somehow known – but he had found it possible to forgive the grandson who had walked the alien way – or else he could not resist the last mute argument to influence that grandson! It might have been his own death that Na-Ta-Hay had foreseen – or perhaps the death of his world. But he had sent this legacy to his daughter's son, striving to keep alive in the last of his own blood a little of the past he had protected so fiercely, fought so hard to hold intact against the push of time and the power of alien energy.

And now out of the night did there come a faint sound of a swinging chant? That song sung for the strengthening of a warrior?

'Step into the track of the Monster Slayer. Step into the moccasins of him whose lure is the extended bowstring, Step into the moccasins of him who lures the enemy to death.'

Storm did not put the contents of this last packet with the things to be left in Larkin's care. He took up the jewellery, running his fingers across the cool substance of silver, the round boss of turquoise, slipping the necklace over his head where it lay cold against his breast under his shirt. The ketoh clasped his wrist. He rolled the concha belt into a coil to fit into his trail bag.

Then he got to his feet, the blanket folded into a narrow length resting on his shoulder. He had never worn a 'chief blanket in all his life, yet its soft weight now had a warm and familiar feel, bringing with it the closeness of kinship – linking the forgotten hands that had woven it to Hosteen Storm, refugee on another world, lost to his people and his home.

Lost! Dumbly Storm turned to face the east, toward the mountain ranges. He threw his hat down on the blanket roll, baring his head to the tug of the wind from those high hills, and walked forward through the night, doubly lighted by the two small moons, coming out over a little rise that could not even be named 'hill'. He sat down, cross-legged. There had always been a strong tie between the Dineh and their land. In the past they had chosen to starve in bad times rather than be separated from the mountains, the deserts, the world they knew.

He would not remember I He dared not! Storm's hands balled into fists and he beat them upon his knees, feeling that pain far less than the awaking pain inside him. He was cut off – exiled – And he was also accursed, unless he carried out the purpose that had brought him here. Yet still there was this other hesitation in him. Without realizing it, he reverted to age-old beliefs. He must have broken his warrior's magic. And so he could not meet Quade until he was whole again, once more armed against the enemy – the time was not yet ripe.

How long he sat there he did not know. But now there were streaks of orange-red in the mauve sky. It was not the same promise given by the sun to Terra, but with it came the feeling that his decision had been rightly made.

Storm faced the band of growing colour, raising his arms and holding up into that light first his bared knife and then his stun rod – the arms of a warrior – to be blessed by the sun. He pointed them first at the life-giving heat in the sky and then at the earth, the substance from which the Faraway Gods had fashioned the People in the long ago. He had not the right, as had a Singer, to call upon those forces he believed existed, and possibly, this far from the land of the Dineh, the Faraway Gods could not, would not listen. Yet something within Storm held the belief that they could and did.

Beauty is around me – This one walks in beauty – Good is around me – This one walks in beauty –

Perhaps the words he recalled were not the right ones, perhaps he did wrong to pre-empt the powers of a Singer. But he thought that the Old Ones would understand.

6

The wind that had drawn Storm to this little height died away. With a soft, coaxing whine Surra pressed against his leg and bumped her head against the hand that had dropped from his knife hilt. He heard the

chittering of the meerkats in the grass. Above, a perfectly shaped black silhouette on the dawn sky, Baku mounted to greet the new day in the freedom of the upper air. Storm breathed deeply. His feeling of loss and loneliness dimmed as he returned to the trail camp to make his farewells.

A short appraisal of Sorenson's preparations told the Terran that the Survey man was as competent as Larkin about the details of packing. The party was a small one: Sorenson himself, the settler pack master, Mac Foyle, and three Norbies, among whom Storm was not too surprised to find Gorgol. He raised his hand in greeting to the young native hunter, as he led his pack mare along to be lined with the others.

Foyle eyed this addition to the train with some astonishment, for the meerkats clung to the top of the mare's pack and in addition she bore an improvised perch rigged for Baku. Surra trotted on her own four paws, well able to match the ambling pace of the pack animals.

Those are a couple of tricky riders you got there,' Foyle hailed the Terran. 'What are they, young fella? Monkeys? I heard tell of monkeys but I've never seen 'em.'

'Meerkats,' supplied Storm.

'From Terra, eh?' Foyle tested a lashing, looked over the mare's rig with approval, and then brought up his own riding horse. 'Smart lookin' little tykes – what are they good for?'

Storm laughed. 'Digging mostly. See their big claws? Those can make the dirt fly when it's necessary. They also bring back what they take a fancy to. You might call them thieves sometimes –' He snapped his fingers at Ho and King and they blinked back at him, uncaring.

'Heard about you and your animals back in town. Your name's Storm, isn't it? Heard tell, too, how you knocked out one of Gorlund's riders just pattin' him on the head – or so the boys were sayin'.'

Storm smiled. 'Commando tricks, Foyle. That rider was loaded and wanted to stretch himself a little, only he did it a bit too wide and in the wrong direction –'

Foyle examined him with a frank stare that climbed from boot soles to the top of his hat. 'Bet the boys weren't far wrong either about your bein' thunder and lightnin' all rolled up into one. You aren't so big a fella, but it's the small ones, light on their feet, who can really cause trouble. I'd like to have seen that dust-up, I surely would!' Foyle jerked the lead rope of the first pack horse and that animal obediently fell into line behind.

They went down slope to the river where Surra balked on the bank, spitting her displeasure at the thought of water and wet fur. Storm soothed her and tossed a rope end, to be caught in her teeth after a last cat-curse. Then, with the dune cat swimming along with the horses, they crossed the Irrawady to the field above which the eastern mountains reached into the faint lavender of the sky.

Sorenson not only knew how to organize an expedition, he could also lead it. And Storm soon learned that this was the third and not the first time the Survey Service man had attempted to find the Sealed Caves.

'Water's the problem,' he explained. 'You can travel this country in the spring, or for about four short weeks in the fall, and live off it. The rest of the time you have to pack water and food for your horses. And that just can't be done, except at ruinous expense, which my department won't authorize on mere rumour alone. We had one successful season before the war, opened a small dig on the Krabyaolo, that's the edge of the Peak country. And a piece of carving was unearthed there that caused an explosion in



rarefied circles. So the authorities will grant us a pittance now and then for these short trips. Let me discover something really worthwhile and they might set up a permanent work camp. I've been told that the water supply is better in the direction we're heading this trip –'

"This thing you found – what made it so important?"

'Did you ever see any Lo Sak Ki work?' Sorenson counter-questioned.

'Not that I know of –'

That's a unique type of carving found in the Lo Sal provinces on Altair Three – very intricate patterning, shows evidence of a long development of civilized art, undoubtedly the result of a lengthy period of experiment and refinement. And it's native to Altair Three. Only this piece we found repeated at least two of Lo Sak Ki basic designs.'

'I don't suppose there are too many different designs possible,' ventured Storm. 'And with about two thousand planets producing art work – twenty-five other nonhuman races of high intelligence into the bargain, as well as all the dead civilizations we have uncovered in space – designs could be repeated without being related.'

'Logical enough. But see here –' The Survey man used his quirt as a pointer to indicate the ketoh on the Terran's wrist. 'I take it that is Terran, also that it may represent some lesser known tribal work there, perhaps it has ceremonial significance –'

'It was developed from a bow guard once worn by my people when they were roaming desert raiders –'

'And were those people a dominant nation on your world in the days when separate nations did exist there?'

Storm laughed. 'I believe they considered themselves to be so – in error. They did rule a small section of one continent for a few years. But no, they were not a dominant race. In fact their country was overrun by a white-skinned race, representing a mechanized, technical civilization, who considered them barbarians.'

'It follows then you would not have found such a bracelet to be an object universally known and worn on Terra?'

'No.'

'So what would have been your reaction if say on – Where did you serve during the war, Storm?'

'Lev – Angol –'

'Lev? Good. Suppose while you were on Lev you investigated a mound of rubble and found buried in it the twin to your bracelet – knowing, of course, that no other galactic trooper had been there recently, that no Terran of the present era could have dropped it. What then would have been your conclusions?'

'Well, either a Levite had imported it or there had been a Terran there once –'

'Just so. But if all other evidence argued that it had been there since before the era of Terran space flight?'

'Either there was earlier Terran space flight than is known to our records, or Terra had off-world visitors herself.'

Sorenson nodded vigorously. 'You see, you cling instinctively to the idea that your bracelet must have come from Terra. Not once have you suggested that an alien developed something of the same design.'

Again Storm laughed appreciatively. 'You make out a good case, sir. Perhaps it's all a matter of native pride –'

'Or perhaps your instinct is entirely right, and there was space travel at an earlier date. So – here we have a similar problem, a design, well known to a very limited section of Altair Three, is found half the galaxy away in ruins attributed by native legend to a nonnative race. May we not assume that others prospected through the star lanes before Terra colony ships and explorers went out to the same paths? If so, why haven't we met them or their descendants? What ended their empire or their confederacy? War? Decadence? Some plague spread from system to system by their ships? Perhaps our answer lies in the Sealed Caves, if we can find them!'

'You are sure you have a good lead this time?'

'Better than just a lead, we have a guide waiting for us in the Valley of Twisted Horns, a man who says he has found at least one cave. Most of the Norbies avoid that section. But their wizards do go in at certain seasons of the year for ceremonial purposes, and war parties can add to their effectiveness by making magic there against their enemies. They believe that a ritual performed near the Caves can render a warrior twice as impervious and the enemy twice as vulnerable, whether that enemy is within striking distance or three days' journey away at the time. Youngsters who want to claim warrior status travel to the Peaks. That young Gorgol joined us for that reason. The place has religious significance. And Bokatan, our guide, is a clan wizard. He's made three such journeys and now he believes that the Sealed Caves people want to issue forth again and that an off-worlder must open the gate for them – hence our expedition has his blessing.'

'Has Bokatan power enough to impress other Norbies with that idea?' questioned Storm. 'We could run into trouble if he hasn't.'

'I believe he has. The alien laws have always frustrated digging here on Arzor. We are not allowed to cultivate the tribes unless they make the first overtures, and we cannot enter their territories unless invited. But this time we're on safe ground. I had to swear to observe a formidable set of conditions before I received my permit and then Bokatan testified for me. A few off-world men have lived as licensed yoris hunters in Norbie territory, and from them, and the settlers for whom the Norbies will work, we have to pick up all we know about their customs. And there are tribes back in the hills who have had no contact with off-worlders or settlers at all, whose whole way of life may differ radically from those we do know something about –'

'You can't live in a Norbie camp without government permission?'

'Oh, I guess it has been done, but the invitation has to come from the Norbie clan involved.'

Storm eyed the ranges ahead. He would fulfil his contract with the expedition. But afterwards what was to prevent his cutting loose and striking down south on his own? He had the team and he had learned how to live off the land in far more hostile countries than this one, including some where not only the natives were deadly enemies but also the land itself provided fatal pitfalls for the unwary.

As they travelled, Storm fitted into the wilderness and the duties of a scout as a hand would slip into a well-worn glove. He perfected his finger-talk with Gorgol's eager aid and the assistance of the other Norbies. But repeated failures taught him the truth of what he had heard – that an off-worlder could not hope to learn and use the vocal speech of the natives. His efforts to imitate their twittering actually seemed to hurt their ears.

In spite of their lack of a common oral speech the Norbies adopted him in a way they did not accept Sorenson or Foyle. The Terran tried their bows, displaying his familiarity with that type of weapon, only he discovered that he could not string one made for an adult Norbie. Gorgol's was lighter and when Storm's trial shaft centred in the heart of a deerlike browser, the Norbies ceremoniously presented him with a smaller weapon of his own and a quiver containing five arrows with fire-bright heads, points brilliant enough to have been chipped from gem stone.

'Warrior arrows,' Gorgol told him via fingers. 'No use second time after they have been dipped in man-blood. You warrior –you can use.'

The young native tried to persuade Storm to follow the Norbie custom of tattooing a bright scarlet band about the old scar on his shoulder, urging that any warrior would be proud to display such marks at the evening fire when Norbie men stripped off their corselets, showing for the awe of their untried fellows their marks of valour.

It was usual that Gorgol and Storm were paired as scouts, Baku circling overhead, and Surra ranging in a crisscross pattern to cover both flanks. The meerkats rode in skin bags slung across Rain's back, scrambling out at every halt to go exploring on their own, but returning readily to Storm's call, usually dragging some prize – a succulent root or brightly coloured stone – which had taken their fancy, as loot.

This acquisitive habit of theirs was a never-ending source of amusement for the whole party, and there was a demand at each evening's camp for Storm to turn out the bags where the meerkats stored their treasures and reveal what Ho and Hing had thought worth retrieving that day.

Twice they turned up worthwhile items. Once it was an 'eye' stone – an odd gem sometimes found in dried river beds. It was shaped like a golden drop, the colour of dark honey, with a slitted line of red fire through its middle, not unlike one of Surra's eyes – save for the colour. And it changed shades when moved from light to dark – the red slit lightening to yellow, the honey becoming greenish.

But it was the other find, made on the tenth day after they had left Irrawady Crossing, that excited the Norbies. Emptied out of Ho's bag, among other gleanings, was an arrowhead. It was barbed and unlike the others Storm had seen in use by the expedition scouts, for the crystal from which it was fashioned was a milky white. Since the natives would not personally handle any of the meerkats' plunder, the Terran picked it up, balancing it on his hand. Hunting points were always of green-gold stone, war arrows clear crystal with a blue cast – at least those carried by the camp Norbies were. This one's delicate point had been snapped off, but otherwise it was a beautiful piece of fletcher's art.

Dagotag, the leader of the Norbies, examined it carefully as Storm held it out, but he did not offer to touch it. He sucked in his breath loudly, a Norbie preliminary to serious pronouncement, and then made fast finger-talk.

That be Nitra – over-the-mountains-men. Warrior – this be war arrow. Come to collect honours for Nitra warrior talk – kill strangers –'

They be enemy you?' Storm signed.

Dagotag nodded. 'Enemy us – we Shosonna people. Maybeso enemy you faraway men. Nitra never see faraway men – big trophy bow hand –'

The Nitra eat THE MEAT?' Sorenson shaped a sign forbidden save in times of stress, and punctuated his question by spitting ritually into the fire three times.

'Not so!' Dagotag's fingers flew. Take trophy – hang bow hand of enemy in wizard house. But no eat THE MEAT. Only evil men do so. Nitra – good fighters – not evil ones who listen to black spirits in the night!

'But they might fight us?' Storm persisted.

'Yes – if they track us. But this point – it may be old – of another season. Only we must watch –'

Every Norbie had reached for his skin bedroll and was bringing out his well-protected package of personal war arrows to place the customary five such shafts in their quivers beside the ordinary hunting points.

Storm spoke to Sorenson. 'We'll have plenty of warning if they do try to scout us. I have yet to see any living thing creep by Surra undetected.' He tossed the enemy arrowhead into the air and caught it. Dragged out of a man's flesh, those cruel, brittle barbs were clearly meant to be left in the wound on the way. It was as wicked a thing as a blaster. Where Ho had found it and how long it had lain there were the important questions. Was it truly the relic of some long-ago raid, or had its owner discarded it that very day because it was broken?

He ordered the dune cat on guard, certain that no scout of the Nitra could win past her. And tomorrow Baku would comb the wastes ahead of them with better eyes than any human or humanoid possessed. The party was reasonably safe from a surprise attack, but there was the matter of an ambush, which could be so easily staged in this country, where the trail threaded through canyons and narrow defiles, along twisted traces where it was sometimes necessary to dismount and lead one's horse. And the farther they bored into the mountains, the worse the going became. He could well understand that only a strong lure could drag anyone into this desolate country.

After Sorenson and Mac turned in, Storm brought out his own bow and arrows. The fire had not yet died down and he held those glittering points in its glow. One by one he touched each to his wrist and pressed, saw the answering drop of blood cloud the crystal tip. Then, when all had been so painted, Storm let the blood fall in a thick dollop to the ground. The age-old offering to secure strong 'medicine' for a new war weapon was made. Why did he offer it now – and to what spirit of the Arzoran wilderness?

'Why you do so?' The slender hand in the firelight sketched that inquiry.

He did not know the Norbie word for fortune or luck – but he used the finger vocabulary he did have and tried clumsily to explain:

'Give blood – arrow shoot straight – enemy feel. Blood pay for good arrow –'

That is true! You faraway man – but you think Norbie. Maybeso Norbie inside man – he fly far – far – be caught faraway – want to get back to his own clan – enter in faraway baby – so come back now. True – true –' The yellow-red fingers tapped lightly on the back of Storm's hand close to that tiny wound.

'Here – outside – you be faraway man. Inside, you Norbie come home again!'

'Perhaps –' Storm agreed lest he give offence.

'The sealed ones will know. They came far – far – too. Maybeso they like you –'

Gorgol spoke with the confidence of one who was acquainted with the mysterious, legendary people, and Storm asked another question:

'Gorgol knows the sealed ones?'

His question loosed a flood of story. Gorgol – three seasons back as far as Storm could determine – had left his tribe on his man-trip, to prove himself a lone hunter able to stand with the adult males of Krotag's following. After Norbie custom he had either to engage an enemy tribesman on his own – if he were lucky enough to find a roving warrior of some clan traditionally at war with his people – or kill without aid one of the four dangerous forms of wildlife. Since his 'inside man' had suggested such a path in a dream, Gorgol had headed to the eastern mountains, working his way along the same general direction the expedition was now travelling.

There he had come across the spoor of an 'evil flyer', the giant bird-thing the Norbies regarded with a wholesome aversion for its unclean habits and respect for its ferocious fighting spirit. Since he could hope for no better kill to establish himself among the men, Gorgol had spent the better part of five days tracking the creature to its nesting ledge high in the mountains. But he had been too eager at his first shot and had wounded it only.

The bird, after the manner of its species, had attacked him, and there had followed a running fight down the side of the nesting peak into a valley where Gorgol had laid an ambush that had successfully finished the flyer. Though he had been injured in the final encounter, he was not too badly wounded.

He thrust his leg out into the firelight now, tracing for Storm the blue line of a ragged scar fully ten inches long.

Disabled by his hurt, Gorgol had been forced to stay in the valley of the ambush. Luckily the season was still one of rains and the big dry had not yet begun so there was a trickle of water from the heights. And during his imprisonment in the narrow cut he had discovered a walled-up cave opening, together with other objects made by intelligent beings who were neither Norbie nor settler.

He had left those finds behind him when at last he could hobble, not wishing to vex the sealed ones. But since that day he had remained certain that he had chanced upon one of the doors of the Sealed Caves.

'The sealed ones – they good to men who keep their laws. Put in Gorgol's head how to kill flyer – send water drip to drink while leg bad. Old stories say sealed ones good to Norbies long, long ago. I say this too. Maybeso I die there did not their magic help me! Their magic big –' His hand expanded in the large sign. 'They do much – sealed away from sun they sleep – but still they do much!'

'Could you find this valley again?'

'Yes. But not go there unless sealed ones allow. I follow bird. Sealed ones know I come not to disturb them, not to dig them up. They excuse. Go to wake them – maybeso they not like. Must call – then we go.'

Storm heard the conviction in that and respected it. Each man had a right to his own beliefs. But this did back up Soren-son's story that the wizard Bokatan had offered to guide them because he believed that the sealed ones themselves were in favour of it. And since the country of Gorgol's hunting adventures was in the same general direction as the territory into which the expedition was heading, perhaps they were going to find the mysterious Sealed Caves after all.

7

The sun was a warm hand pressing on his bared shoulders as Storm lay on top of an outcrop, his long-vision glasses trained on the pass ahead. He had shed his easily sighted fawn shirt many days ago, having discovered that his own brown skin was hard to distinguish from the rocks.

Now the path of the expedition had narrowed to one choice, a defile leading between climbing walls, a perfect country for ambush. Properly they should travel it by night, except that the footing was none too good and they dared not risk a fall for either man or horse. Already the party followed well-tryed Terran precautions for advance into enemy territory, stopping in the early afternoon to graze their horses and feed themselves, and then moving on for an hour after sunset, so that their night camp site was far from the place where they had first – to any spy-scout – bedded down. Whether such elementary tactics would mislead experienced native raiders was another matter.

Storm was certain that they were under observation, though he had no real proof except the alert uneasiness of the team. And he depended upon bird and cat for his first warning against any attack.

Now Baku did come in, voicing a harsh scream, to send winging out of the brush below a whole covey of panic-stricken grass hens. There was someone coming through the defile, a Norbie riding alone on a vividly spotted black and white horse. And the white star on its forehead was dabbed with red, a circle centred by a double dot – If this newcomer was not the wizard Bokatan, then he had acquired Bokatan's favourite mount, which had been described to Storm in advance. This would not be too impossible. Storm remained where he was, his bow ready.

'Hoooooowoooo!' The call was the twitter of Norbie speech prolonged into a high-pitched hoot. Out of the rock, seemingly, Dagotag arose to meet the wizard. At least the party now had their promised guide.

Before nightfall they had crossed the invisible border of the taboo land, to camp that night on the banks of a swollen stream. The water was red with silt, whirling along uprooted bushes and even small trees. Sorenson surveyed it critically.

'You can have too much of a good thing. We have to depend upon the mountain rains for water. But, on the other hand, flash floods in these narrow gorges can wipe out a party such as ours in a matter of seconds. Tomorrow we'll have to parallel this as long as we can to water the horses. Let us hope the level begins to drop instead of to rise –'

Before noon the next day, not only was the flood dwindling but Bokatan pointed them away from it, using as a guide for their new direction something that excited them all. There was no mistaking the artificial origin of that low black ridge, running at right angles to the north-east.

Storm measured it roughly with his hand, finding it about a foot wide, though raised only a few inches from the ground. It was wedge-shaped with the narrower edge straight up. To the touch it was not stone, nor metal, at least no stone nor metal he had ever seen before. And its purpose remained a mystery. A knife blade made no impression, but under prodding fingers the substance had a faintly greasy feel, though neither dry soil nor leaves clung to its surface. Nor would Surra put paw on it. She sniffed

dubiously at the ridge, plainly avoiding contact, sneezing twice and shaking her head in her gesture of distaste.

'Like a rail,' Mac commented, and whacked the first pack horse on, though that animal, too, picked a way that did not bring it close to the black ridge.

Sorenson stopped to snap tri-dee prints of the thing though Bokatan urged the party to hurry. 'Up!' his fingers counselled. 'Up and through the hole in the earth before sun sets – then you may look upon the valley of the sealed ones –'

Already the cliffs rose so high that the light of the sun did not penetrate to the floor of the canyon through which they passed, and gathering shadows thickened almost to dusk as they rode along by the black rail.

Death defiles, that old belief of his people haunted Storm, while his modern training denied it. A man who touched the dead, or their possessions, dwelt under a roof where death had been, was unclean, accursed. This black ridge was like a thread wrought by the dead to draw others into the house of the dead – He blinked, shrugged the blanket about his shoulders, dropping a little behind the rest as he fumbled in his belt pouch for an object he had fashioned during their noon halt.

The Terran did not dismount, but leaned far from his riding pad, holding that small sliver of wood plumed at one end with two of Baku's feathers. It had been shaped with the aid of one of his war arrows after immemorial custom, and now he aimed its point at the alien rail – if rail it was. The prayer stick caught and held in some infinitesimal crack of the substance, standing unwavering, its feathers triumphantly erect.

One magic against another. Storm clicked his tongue to Rain and the horse trotted on to catch up, just as a turn in the canyon brought them to what Bokatan could well term the 'hole' in the earth.

If they had not been able to see the brightness of sunlight ahead, Storm would have protested against entering the place. For the tunnel opening was like an open mouth, fanged at the upper arch with regular pointed projections of the same substance as the rail that had led them here. What purpose those projections had originally served, the explorers could not guess. Now they resembled nothing so much as teeth ready to close upon the unwary. And Storm envied Baku who could wing aloft and cross the mountain barrier in the free air.

Though the tunnel was a short one, open at both ends, within it the air was stale to taste and smell, as if no cleansing wind had ever flown through. Surra took the passage in a rush, the horses pounding after her, until they burst out into the brilliant blaze of the sun again, to find themselves at one end of a much larger valley.

'This is a leg-breaking do, if I ever saw one!' Mac exploded – rightly. For before them was a choked stretch of debris, tumbled blocks of the black material overgrown with generations of vines and brush.

Sorenson dismounted. 'Some kind of a building – perhaps a gatehouse for defence –' He was reaching for his tri-dee camera when Bokatan pushed to the fore.

'Into the valley now – night come here – bad –'

Reluctantly Sorenson agreed. Storm was already afoot, his horse's reins hooked over his arm, ready to help Mac with the pack train, while the Norbies strung out, scouting the easiest way through the maze before them. Storm, threading a narrow path between banks of the broken black material, decided this was an excellent trap, certainly not any trail to be travelled after dark.

'I'd like to know what happened here.' Mac puffed up to join the Terran, towing the grey lead horse of the pack train. 'Looks like somebody got real mad and loosed a buster where it would do the most harm – don't it now?'

Storm gazed at the ruins about them for the first time with interest in the debris itself, not just regarding it as an entanglement through which they must worm their way. He still did not care to make too close an inspection, but Mac's suggestion was shrewdly taken. An earthquake might have reduced a stoutly built structure to this, but mere lapse of time – no. And outside of a convulsion of nature there remained only war. Yet nowhere in the tradition of the Norbies was there any reference to war as the reason for the withdrawal of the sealed ones.

'Yes – a buster –' Mac scrambled ahead. 'Or maybe a good, big flood.'

'Or a series of floods –' That was Sorenson catching up as they paused to rest the horses. 'Look there!' Now that he pointed out the high watermarks on the wall of the valley the others could not miss them.

'Do you suppose that tunnel acts as a drain?' hazarded Storm.

'If it wasn't originally intended for that use, it must serve now – and has done so for a good many years. There's a large lake in the valley according to Bokatan – a few flash floods and the overflow must seek an outlet –'

The ruins sprawled for half a mile of hard going. Then they came into the course of a dry river bed fronting a sharp slope. The black rail ran straight ahead, to be hidden in the earth of the slope that perhaps had accumulated since the builders of the black wedge had laid it down.

Up the slope they trudged and stood on the verge of a broad dam, which controlled the stagnant-looking, brown water of quite a sizeable lake. And beyond the opposite shore of that dank lake was the rest of the valley.

Dotted in the lake itself and along its shores were mounds of weathered and overgrown debris. The remains of a city? Sorenson sighed and pulled off his hat, wiping his arm across his flushed dusty face.

'We may not have found the Caves,' he said slowly, 'but we have found something. Go ahead and make camp, boys, I want all the shots of this I can get before the light is gone!'

They made camp on an inlet of the lake and Storm took over the job of dampening down the ground with insect repellent. He noticed that the Norbies did not range far away and that the natives piled their hide night shelters well within the circle of the fire glow.

Mac surveyed the wealth of mounds. 'If we're going to dig, we have plenty of places to choose from. Only maybe you 'n' me 'n' Sorenson's goin' to have to do most of it. Norbies don't ever take kindly to usin' shovels –'

'About all we can do on this trip is map.' Sorenson came down at last to join them. 'Maybe open a test trench or two. A couple of small finds to impress the directors would help out a lot. But if this site is as good as it looks, we'd need a more permanent camp and a dozen years to really clean it out. Bokatan' – he appealed to their guide – 'this water,' he signed, 'does it go with the coming of the big dry, or does it stay?'



The Norbie's hands spread in a gesture of bafflement. 'Bokatan come only in wet times – no see in dry. But water much –no think go away when big dry comes –'

'I'm inclined to believe that,' Sorenson said happily. That means we can think about year around work here.'

'If you don't get too much water,' Storm returned. 'From the evidence of those high watermarks there have been floods clear across this space.'

The Survey man refused to be dismayed by that. 'If necessary we can pitch camp back against the cliffs to the north. There is an upward slope toward that end of the valley. Surely the whole place is never altogether under water. We've had high rains for the past month and see the size of the lake?'

He was given a chance to test his deductions before dawn the next morning, for the same kind of drenching rain that had bogged the trail herd came to flood the camp. In a hurry, they moved away from the rapidly rising lake. To take refuge on top of one of the mounds of debris was a temptation, but such a move could only prove more dangerous in the end.

While the steady downpour cut the danger of attack from a Nitra war party, the rain bothered the Norbies. Water and war were both gifts of the Thunder Drummers, but this was not good land in which to be caught by water, and, when they witnessed one landslide along the cliff wall, they pressed back to the upper and unknown northern end of the valley.

Three of the Norbies rode in search of higher ground that might lie above the old flood-level marks, and Storm and Mac, working together, pushed the pack horses steadily away from the lake, following the upward slope. Sorenson and Bokatan struck off in the direction of the reputed Caves, for the Survey man was determined to learn all he could if there was danger of their having to pull out entirely.

Usually tractable enough, the pack horses were hard to handle that morning. Storm wished he could have coaxed Surra to serve as an additional drover, but the big cat had disappeared on her own early in the rain and the Terran knew she was going to hole up somewhere out of the wet. Since he had given her no definite orders she would follow her own instincts. He had not sighted Baku since dawn.

Nearly all the horses had scrambled up a steeper rise when the Terran heard Mac shout excitedly. Hoping that the pack master had discovered a good stretch of higher territory, Storm whacked at the last horse in line, his own mare.

Then the world came apart about him. Storm had been under fire on the training range, he had witnessed – from a distance – the obliteration bombing of an enemy stronghold. But this was no man-made fury – it was the raw sword of nature herself striking unleashed.

The rain, now heavier than before, became a smothering blanket under a black sky. He could not even see Rain's ears, head, plastered mane. The gush of water took away his breath, beat about his body.

Lightning – purple fire in jagged spears – thunder claps that left one deafened, battered – Storm's horse reared, fought for freedom, wild with fear. Then the stallion ran through a wall of water and his rider could only cling blindly to his seat, lying along the horse's neck gasping.

They were still in the dark but the rain no longer beat on them, only the fury of its rushing filled the world with sound. Lightning again tore at the sky. And above him, in that flash, Storm saw an overhang of earth break loose and fall. Half dazed, he jumped, stumbled to his knees, and went down, as mud cascaded on

him, pressing him flat under its weight until he lost consciousness.

It was dark when the Terran opened his eyes and tried feebly to move – dark with an absence of all light that was as frightening as the silence that now walled him in. But, half-conscious as he was, Storm struggled for freedom. There was a break in the cover over him, and he levered up the forepart of his body.

None of his bones appeared to be broken. He hurt all over, but he could move arms and legs, wriggled the rest of him out of the mass of soil that had imprisoned him. Storm tried to remember just what had happened in those last moments before the world caved in.

He called – to be answered by a plaintive whinny, shrill and frightened. Storm called again through the darkness in soft-voiced reassurance, using the speech of the horse tamer, which he had used with Rain since the first moment he had laid hands on the stallion. And, as he spoke, he dug at the earth still encasing his legs, until he could stand up.

The Terran explored about him with outstretched arms – until he remembered the torch at his belt. Snapping its button, Storm aimed the beam straight up. The answering light was faint, oddly paled. He stood by a rock wall – and, as the beam swept down and away from that solid surface, it was swallowed up in a pocket of darkness that might mark the interior of a cave of some expanse. But caught in the torch's beam was Rain, white foam roping his jaws, his eyes rolling wildly.

Storm moved to run his hand along the sweating arch of the horse's neck, conscious now of the smell of this place. Just as they had found it in the entrance tunnel of the valley, so here the air was stale, musty. As he continued to breathe it the Ter-ran felt a growing sickness and an impulse to turn and batter his way out of this cave, or pocket, or whatever it was, that held them. He fought for self-control.

On his right was a second rock wall, and behind him the fall of moist earth in which he had been caught. Then the torch beam glistened at floor level. Runnels of water were sluggishly crawling toward him from under that mass of loose earth, gathering in the slight depressions of the rock floor. As Storm watched there was more movement, a slide of the soil, only this one uncovered a dim spot of light close to the roof – a hands-breadth of metallic grey that might mark the sky.

Storm snapped off the torch, spoke once more to Rain. With great care he climbed, a few inches at a time, to reach that breakthrough, once leaping clear to avoid being carried back by a second slip. But, at last, he got there, thankful to draw in lungfuls of the rain-washed air, clean and sweet without. The soft earth was easy enough to dig and he set about with his hands to enlarge the opening.

He came upon a rock that had to be dislodged with care, and marvelled at the chance or good fortune that had saved him and the stallion from such a bombardment, giving them their lives in spite of their imprisonment. Storm's wonder at the narrowness of their escape increased as his nails scraped across an even larger stone, one wedged in the opening as a stopper might be driven into a bottle.

The Terran returned to clawing at the earth heaped about that rock, pushing outward when he could. Now and again he checked the seepage under the wall; the flow was increasing, if slowly. Could a stream, or part of the lake, be lapping outside?

He could not remember in which direction Rain had raced in panicked flight – west, north, or east –

A whole block of moist soil tangled with roots gave way before him and rain beat in to soak him in an instant. The moisture felt clean and good against his body, washing the mud and staleness of the place

from him.

Worming his way back up, Storm thrust head and shoulders out of the hole. Visibility was limited by the rain, but what he could see made him gasp, for the whole area below bore no resemblance to anything he remembered.

A sheet of water, swirling angrily and pitted by the lash of the rain, lapped at the other side of the barrier on which he half lay. Uprooted trees tossed on that roiled surface and just below him was the body of the black pack mare, anchored to the shore by the weight of a rock that had crushed her head and one foreleg.

On the frail island of her body crouched a small shape with matted fur, clinging despairingly to the bobbing pack. And seeing that refugee, Storm shovelled swiftly at the earth. He ripped off his belt, stripping it quickly of knife sheath and stun rod holster, and on his third toss one end of the belt landed on the pack. The meerkat moved swiftly, climbing that improvised ladder to a point where Storm could scoop the small creature to safety.

It was Hing and she was uninjured as far as his examining hands could determine. What had happened to Ho he did not want to guess, for the bag in which Hing's mate had ridden must now be trapped under the dead mare.

Whimpering, the meerkat clung to Storm, trying in plaintive little cries to tell her misery. He scraped the mud from her fur as best he could, and carried her into the cave to wrap her in the blanket. With her snug he returned to their window on the outside.

It might be dangerous to try to dig out more of the cave-closing slide at present. Such efforts could only let in the lake waters to engulf them. For such work he needed better light and an end to the rain. And both of those might come in the morning. For the present there was nothing to do but wait out the hours. Surely the skies could not go on releasing such a weight of water forever!

The grey of the day became the dark of a starless, moonless night. Storm rested half across the wall, Hing curled against him, watching in vain hopes of seeing some light along the cliff walls that would signal the escape to safety of the others, some indication that he was not the only human survivor of the flood that filled the valley.

Storm must have fallen asleep at last, for when he roused, it was to find weak sunlight on his face. Hing sat by his shoulder making an exacting toilet, chittering with almost human disgust at the unhappy state of her usually well-groomed fur.

The water had fallen away outside, grounding some of the wrack that it had floated. Something as red-brown as the soil, with a wicked mouthful of teeth, was busy at the mare, feasting upon the bounty. Storm shouted and flung a clod of earth at the creature.

As the scavenger flashed to cover the Terran's voice echoed weirdly from the heights. He shouted again, this time with a summoning call. Though he did that again and again, waiting eagerly between each shout until he counted twenty – there came no answer. So he set to work again digging until he was able to get out, skidding down to bring up short against the dead pack horse.

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Having salvaged the mare's pack and dumped it in the cave, Storm stationed Hing on guard over what

might be the last supplies. The meerkat was not a fighter, but she would keep off the scavengers such as the one he had seen at work earlier that morning. That precaution taken, the Terran splashed out to explore, using a length of driftwood to anchor him on the slippery mud banks. Twice he disturbed scavengers and carrion birds and both times hurried to see what they fed upon. Once it was the horse Sorenson had ridden, and secondly it was a battered wild thing that must have been swept down the mountain stream. He stopped at intervals to call, to whistle for Baku – but there was never any answer.

As the sun rose higher, its rays sucked up the moisture and Storm was able to flounder about the end of the enlarged lake. The spread of murky water now covered five-sixths of the valley, including the entire lower end through which they had entered. And the Terran found no traces of any survivors, saw no camp smoke, had no answers to his frequent hails.

The mounds of debris were largely covered, only a few projecting above the surface of the flood. On one or two he sighted moving creatures, all small refugees from among the grass dwellers of the valley. He was about to turn back to the cave when he heard the beat of powerful wings and saw a black shape etched against the clear sky – a shape that could only be Baku. Storm whistled and the eagle dropped in her falcon swoop.

She skimmed above his head, thus delivering her usual signal to follow. But the path she pointed lay directly across the lake and Storm distrusted those dark waters full of floating drift and perhaps some unpleasant water-dwelling things he could not sight. He splashed along the verge, sometimes thigh deep, always sounding ahead with his pole. Baku had come to rest on one of the above-surface mounds, one which had been situated far up the dry portion of the valley before the storm. The Terran recognized it as an earlier landmark by a few feet of battered outcrop that still bore some resemblance to a wall. He shouted and Baku screamed in answer but did not rise. His testing pole plunged into a sudden deep and Storm knew he would have to swim to reach that islet. He took to the deeper water gingerly, striking out with care to avoid the flotsam, hating the smell of the mud-thick liquid that slid greasily about his body.

Then he caught at a block, found his feet, and climbed to the top of the island. He had expected to find traces of the flood. But what he faced now was a battlefield! Three dead men lay there, each with a war arrow in him, each lacking a right hand, Sorenson, Bokatan, and Dagotag. By the signs, they had died early that morning, perhaps when he was making his struggle to get out of the cave.

His age old racial fear of the dead warred in him with the need to know what had happened and the necessity of providing a last service for these whose lives he had shared during the past strenuous days. Storm walked slowly forward and something else stirred, lifted a tawny head on which the fur was matted with red. The Terran sprinted to the side of the dune cat.

Surra whined. The ragged wound on her head was ugly, but, as Storm discovered thankfully, not dangerous. It looked much worse than it was and the attackers must have believed her dead. Not for the first time the Terran wished that the team had speech in common, as well as their trained rapport. He could only survey the scene and try to deduce what had happened.

It was his guess that Sorenson and the two Norbies had been cut off by the flood and had taken refuge on this hillock that was by far the highest in the vicinity. The attack had come later, after the end of the storm. And the attackers had thoroughly looted the camp, stripped the bodies – all weapons were gone.

Storm brought out his small personal aid kit and went to work on Surra, cleansing her wound. She allowed him to handle her, giving only a little protesting cry now and then. He worked as slowly as he could, trying not to think of that other task ahead of him. But with Surra comfortable he forced himself to it, though he could not repress shudders as he straightened out Sorenson's contorted body and placed

the dead Norbies on either side of the Survey man. There was nothing with which to dig graves, but he broke off pieces of the rubble, working with dogged determination, piling the loosened stones and earth over the three, while the sun turned the hillock into a steam bath.

Surra called before he had finished and Storm looked up to see her wavering to her feet. Baku was alive, and Surra, and back in the cave he had Rain and King. He knew little of Norbie war customs, but he did not believe that the Nitra – if it had been those wild tribesmen who attacked here – would linger. They might well believe that they had wiped out all members of the exploring party. He must get Surra to the higher land at the north of the valley, which meant using Rain. Storm spoke gently to the cat, planting in his mind the idea that he must go but would return soon which she would sense.

The water had fallen swiftly so that this time he swam only a few feet as he backtracked. He returned to the cave to discover that Hing had been busy on her own, using her particular talent – digging – perhaps in search of edible roots carried down in the earthslide. Because of her activities he was able to clear a path for Rain. There were iron rations among the supplies he had in the pack and purified water in his canteen. Rain trotted down to suck up a drink from the flood and tear avidly at the waterlogged grass.

Towing the stallion loaded with the supply pack, Hing riding on top, and Baku overhead, Storm came back to the vicinity of the hillock. The sullenly retreating waters had now bared a stretch of washed gravel and boulders against the cliff wall about half a mile ahead, and he chose that site for his temporary camp. Leaving the pack with Hing and Baku on guard, he splashed over to the mound.

Rain had accepted Surra from the start as a running companion. The cat on four feet was a familiar part of his everyday world. But whether the stallion would allow her as a rider was another matter. Storm, mounted, manoeuvred the horse close to the mound, gentling Rain with hands and voice, and when the mount stood quietly, he called to the dune cat. She staggered to the edge of the drop and sprang, landing in front of the man with a sudden shock of weight.

Somewhat to the Terran's surprise, Rain did not try to rid himself of the double burden. And Storm, with Surra draped awkwardly before him, headed the horse back through the roiled waters to the rapidly enlarging dry stretch beyond.

Once on the gravel bed Storm took stock of his supplies. Before leaving Irrawady Crossing he had pared his personal kit to bare essentials, depending upon Sorenson's preparations for food rations. So what he had rescued from the mare was only a fraction of what they might need before they found a way out of the wasteland and gained some isolated settler's holding or a temporary herd station. There were for weapons his stun rod, the bow the Norbies had given him, his belt knife. And for food, a packet of iron rations he had already drawn upon, a survival of his service days. He had his sleeping roll, the blanket from Terra, the small aid kit he had used for Surra, the torch, a hand heat unit with three charges, and a canteen. But he would have to boil his water from now on; the chemical purifiers had gone with the rest of the party's supplies. However, Storm had done with far less when in the field and the team had learned to hunt game with dispatch and economy.

There was an oversized, rock-dwelling, distant cousin of a rabbit, which they had shot and eaten with good appetite on the trail, a deerlike browser, and the grass hens, which could be easily flushed out, though it took a number of them to satisfy a man. But all Arzoran animals moved with water, and he would have to make the river-fed plains before the big dry closed up the land.

Storm sat cross-legged by the bed of grass he had pulled for Surra's resting. King muzzled against him, chattering mournfully to herself. Even the bag in which Ho had ridden was not to be found and she missed her mate. As the Terran stroked her coarse fur comfortingly, he studied the southern end of the valley.

Between him and the gateway of the tunnel there was still a vast spread of water. He was walled off from that exit until the flood retreated still farther. Also – Storm pushed Hing down on his knees, reached for the vision lenses lying by him.

He swept that southern range, dissatisfied. There was something wrong there, though he could not decide just what it could be. He had a feeling that there had been a change in what he saw. His gaze travelled along the cliffs. There were places there where an active man could climb, but none where he could take Rain. No, unless there was a gateway in the north, then the tunnel remained their only exit. And to head north was to bore farther into the untracked wilderness.

To be alone was nothing new for Storm. In one way or another he had walked a lonely road for most of his life. And sometimes it was easier to live with his inner loneliness and just the team, than to exist in a human anthill such as the Centre. But there was something in this valley that he had never met before, not on any alien, enemy-held planet where he had learned to live in peril, where every move might betray him to an enemy and yet not to quick, clean death. This thing clung to the mounds of rubble – to the walls of rock, and the Terran knew that he had not been greatly surprised to find only the dead waiting on the hillock. This was a place that invited death. It repelled his senses, his body. Had it not been that Surra could not yet travel far, Storm would be seeking a way out right now.

The Terran wanted a fire, not only to dry what was left of his clothing and gear and as a source of physical comfort against the chill of the coming waterlogged night, but because fire itself was his species' first weapon against the unknown – the oldest, and the most heartening. Slowly he began to speak aloud, his voice rolling into the chants, the old, old songs meant to be a defence against that which stalks the night, words that he believed he could not remember, but that now came easily in the ancient and comforting rhythms.

Baku, perched on a stone outcrop yards above Storm's head, stirred. Surra raised her chin from her paws, her fox ears pricked. Storm drew his stun rod. His back was against the cliff wall, he had a shielding boulder on his right – only two sides to cover. With the other hand he worked his knife out of its sheath. Any attack would have to be hand to hand. Had a Bowman stalked them the arrow would be already freed from its cord. And his stun ray could take care of a charge –

'Eruooooo!' That call was low, echoing, and it was one he had often heard and could not repeat.

Storm did not relax vigilance, but neither did he press the control button of the ray, as a figure, which was hardly more than a flitting form against shadows gathering in this part of the valley where the western sun was already cut off by the cliffs, came running toward him. Gorgol, his right arm pressed to his chest, reached the gravel beach and dropped on the edge of Surra's bed. His left hand moved in limited signs which Storm had to watch carefully to translate.

'Enemy – after flood – kill – all dead –'

'It is so,' Storm returned. 'Let me see to your wound, warrior.'

The Terran pushed the young native back against the barricade boulder and examined the hurt hurriedly in the fading light. Luckily for the Norbie the arrow had gone cleanly through, and as far as Storm could judge none of the treacherous, glassy barbs had broken off in the flesh. He washed it with the last of the purified water and bound it up. Gorgol sighed and closed his eyes. The Terran brought out a block of concentrated ration, broke off a portion and pushed it into the Norbie's good hand.

When Gorgol opened his eyes again Storm signed the all-important question.

'Nitra gone? Or still here?'

Gorgol shook his head in a determined negative. 'No Nitra –' With the ration block clenched between his teeth, he moved his one set of fingers. 'Not Nitra kill – not Norbies –'

Storm sat back on his heels, his eyes sweeping out over the mound-studded desolation. For an instant or two his vague fears of this place merged in a flash of imagination – the Sealed Cave people? Or some inimical thing they had left here on guard? Then he smiled wryly. Those men on the mound had been killed by arrows, the wound he had just tended was left by the same weapon. His racial superstitions were at war with all the scientific learning of his lost home-world.

'Not Norbies?'

'No Norbie, no Nitra –' Storm had made no mistake in his first reading of Gorgol's signs. Now the native moved his other arm stiffly, forced his right hand to add to the authority of his left. 'Faraway men come – your kind!'

But the arrows? That ritual mutilation of the dead –?

'You see them?'

'I see – I on cliff ledge – water high, high! Men come at end of rain – they wear this' – he tapped the yoris hide corselet protecting his own torso – 'like Norbie – carry bows – like Norbie –but not Norbie. Think Mountain Butchers – steal horses – steal fawns – kill – then say Norbie do. Mark dead like Norbie. They shoot – Gorgol fall like dead – only first Gorgol kill one!' His eyes gleamed brightly. 'Gorgol warrior now! But too many –' He spread all his fingers to spell the size of the other party. 'So when arrow find Gorgol he fall back – be dead – they no climb up to see whether really dead or no –'

'Mountain Butchers!' Storm repeated aloud and Gorgol must have guessed the meaning of the sounds for again he signed an eager assent.

They are still here?'

'Not so. They go –' Gorgol pointed north. 'Think they live there. Not want men to know where they hide – so kill –'

Well, that was one more reason for not heading north when they tried to get out of here. But Gorgol was still making finger-talk.

'They have rider – he tied – maybe they make kill to feed evil spirits' – he hesitated and then added that horrific sign Storm had first seen Sorenson make – 'THE MEAT.'

Storm had heard of some Norbie tribes who, for purposes of a dark devil worship – or devil propitiation – ate prisoners they took under certain conditions. To most of the Arzoran tribes this custom was an abomination and there was a fierce and never-ending warfare waged between the ritual cannibals and their enemies. In Norbie minds the quality of evil was so associated with THE MEAT that it was natural for Gorgol to make the assumption he had just offered.

'Not so,' the Terran corrected. 'Butchers not eat captives. This prisoner – he was from the plains?'

'Rider,' Gorgol agreed.

'Any settlers near here? We could find them – tell them about evil men – how they kill –'

Gorgol turned his head slowly so he looked south. 'Many suns come up – go down – before reach settlers that way. Maybeso we can go. But not in dark – I not know this country – and Nitra be in hills. Man walk soft, so quick, be very careful –' But he glanced back at the Terran with a kind of level measurement the off-world man did not understand.

'With that I agree,' Storm spoke and signed together. The dark was almost on them now. He shared out bedding from his own roll, saw Gorgol was comfortable and then curled up on the grass beside Surra, sleeping as he had so many times before in perfect confidence that the super-acute hearing of the dune cat would warn him of any danger.

It was almost dawn when Storm did wake at her faint signal. He came not only awake but instantly alert, a trick he had learned so far in the past he was no longer conscious of knowing it. Whatever was coming had not aroused Surra's fighting instincts, only her interest. He listened intently, hearing Gorgol's heavy breathing, the rattle of hoof on gravel as Rain stirred. Then that other sound, a pattering noise so faint he could have missed it without Surra's caution.

The light on the gravel bar was grey enough to distinguish objects and he was ready with the stun rod. He aimed at the dusky blot as soon as he was sure it was not a horse. The top-heavy outline against the rocks could be that of only one animal he had seen on Arzor, and they could certainly use the meat such a kill would provide. A minute later he was busy bleeding the carcass of a yearling frawn, one which was plump enough to have enjoyed good foraging lately. Though what a frawn was doing alone in this wilderness was a mystery. The animals were plainsbred and ran in herds and they were never, under ordinary circumstances, either found in the mountain or alone.

Gorgol had an explanation when they squatted close to the fire Storm dared to light after he had heaped some rocks together as a screen. Chunks of frawn steak were spitted on sharpened sticks and the Norbie was giving their even browning careful attention.

'Stolen. Evil men put frawns in hiding – perhaps they lose this one when they drive many through – perhaps storm made herd stampede –'

Storm regarded the meat reflectively. There was a side problem to all this stealing horses and frawns. What in the world – or in Arzor – did the thieves intend to do with their plunder? The market for frawns lay off-world. There was only one space port and all animals loaded there had to be legally accounted for with sales and export papers. Settlers would be the first to detect any newcomer who could not account for his holdings clear back to the moment he set foot on Arzor. What was the profit in stealing meat on the hoof that you had no hope of selling?

'Why they want meat – no sell –' He passed that along to Gorgol, knowing the young native was acute enough to follow his chain of thought.

'Maybeso not sell-big land –' The Norbie waved his left hand wide. Take frawns far – horses, too. Norbie knows of places where Butchers hide. Norbie take horses from their secret places. Hurol, he of Gorgol's own clan – he take three horses so last dry time. He big hunter – warrior –'

So the Norbies raided the secret caches of the Butchers. Now that scrap of information might lead to something. Suppose the Norbies should be encouraged in that useful occupation, one which appealed so



to their own natural tastes? Put a Norbie afoot in the wastes and he could get along. Unhorse an off-worlder without supplies and it was a far different matter. But it all came back to this – how did the Butchers intend eventually to profit from their raids?

The situation might almost suggest a hidden space port to handle illicit trade. A hidden space port! Storm stiffened, his eyes very wide and level as he stared unseeingly at the fire. And Surra, catching from him that hidden tension, growled deep in her throat. There had been hidden space ports of a sort. He had uncovered one himself and brought in a mop-up squad to deal with it and those who manned it. Such a port established to milk a planet of food supplies –! Eagerly he responded to that familiar spur of the hunt.

Sure – the war was over – officially. He had spent that dreary year at the Centre to prove it. But suppose, just suppose that his wild suspicion were right! Then he had another chance – a chance to strike back once more at those who had taken away his world. Storm began to hum under his breath. In that moment his quarrel with Brad Quade was very far away – a thin wisp of a thing out of a half-forgotten story. If he were right –! Oh, Faraway Gods – let him now be right in his preposterous guess!

The Terran turned to Gorgol who had been watching him with close to the same narrow-eyed intensity that Surra's thin pupils mirrored.

These Butchers – they have horses?'

'It is so,' signalled the other.

Then, as Hurol, let us see whether some of those horses may not carry us!'

Gorgol's thin lips drew back in the half-smile of his people. That is good hearing. For these have killed our blood, and for that there must be a taking of hands in return –'

In that moment Storm realized how close he had been to making a grave error of judgment, one which might have finished his friendly relations with the native. Had he ridden south as had been his first plan, then he would have outraged custom that demanded a personal vengeance for those killed here. It was a small thing to weigh against the crime he suspected, but it was a good argument to use against that scrap of conscience that recalled the unfinished matter of Quade.

9

Much as he wanted to be on the move, Storm desired Surra to have another day of rest before he put her to the strain of the trail. And Gorgol's wound also needed tending. After seeing to his patients, the Terran made his own plans for a scouting trip. First south, because he wanted to be sure that the Nitra were not between his party and that retreat route. But before he left, he made other preparations.

Grease from the fawn meat mixed with powdered red dust and a chalky stuff ground from some small soft pebbles provided him with a kind of paint and he went to work, streaking face and chest with splotches and broken lines – War paint or camouflage, it served equally well on both counts.

Gorgol watched the paint job with keen interest.

'You make warrior magic?'

The Terran glanced down at the stripes on his chest and smiled, but the movement of lips made no

difference in the general ghastly effect of his new face mask.

'I make warrior magic – my people's magic –'

On impulse he put over his head the circlet of the necklace and fastened about him, looped over his weapon belt, the concha – the embellished one of his inheritance. Then he considered weapons.

He could use a bow, having two hands. But Gorgol could not. And he would not leave the Norbie with no better defence than just his long-knife. Now he unbuckled the holstered stun rod. Storm knew that the natives had a deeply rooted prejudice against using another man's weapons – believing that there was a mystical relationship between man and his arms. But there were also occasions of free gift in which the 'magic' of the weapon could be transferred intact. He did not know the Norbie ceremony, but he could follow his own intuition.

As he had done on the morning he had started on this expedition. Storm held the sheathed weapon to the sky and then to the earth, before he extended it to Gorgol with the sign that signified the weapon was to be a permanent gift.

Gorgol's slit-pupilled eyes widened, but he did not yet touch finger to the rod. Stun ray guns were imported from off-world, they cost what seemed to a native a fabulous amount in trade goods and Norbies seldom bought them, since it was too hard to get fresh clips to recharge them. But the gift of such a weapon was sometimes made by off-worlorder to native and that was a very serious and honourable thing.

'Press here – aim so –' Slowly Storm went through the drill, but he knew that Gorgol had worked by the side of settler riders often enough to understand. The Norbie nodded and stood proudly as the Terran rebuckled the holster to the belt of the new owner.

Storm was about to sling his arrow quiver over his shoulder when Gorgol stopped him with an imperative gesture. One-handedly the Norbie transferred half of his hunting points to the Terran's keeping. The war arrows were sacred and could not be given to another lest they fail him in some crucial moment. Now, equipped, painted, a true Navajo again outwardly, Storm saluted with upraised hand and padded away from the camp, Baku taking to the air to accompany him.

An unpleasant smell issued from the water still murky with mud. Where necessary, Storm splashed through shallows. But he worked his way around the drying outer rim of the valley, not attempting to swim the lake. There were dead animals, bloated, floating in the silted liquid. However, he found no trace of the party's horses, of Mac and the third Norbie from the Crossing, or any of the party supplies. Had any of the mounts survived they must have been scooped up by the raiders.

As the Terran approached the southern end of the valley where the tunnel lay, he halted at regular intervals to sweep the ground ahead with his vision lenses. And now he could see that there was a change in the outline of the heights there. But it was not until Storm reached the wall of the lake and climbed a slime-encrusted mound of mud-cemented debris that he knew the worst.

The tunnel was gone, obliterated by a slide that would probably yield only to the powerful punch of a boomer, if there were one on Arzor, which he very much doubted. A man probably could climb those heights, fearing all the while to be trapped in another slip of the soft earth, but he could not get Rain through. It was certainly intended by someone or something that there was to be no easy escape southward. Storm felt a queer elation because he had already made his choice before he knew that the door had been slammed shut.

An hour or so later Gorgol accepted the information indifferently. Apparently it was of little matter that Baku was the only one that could now cross into the outer world with any ease. He, himself, was eager to head north. And Storm promised that they would leave Surra and Rain with their supplies in the cliff camp the next morning, he and Gorgol to try to trace the path the wandering frawn had used. For frawns were not climbers and it was certain that any trail the animal had followed into their valley was one a horse could negotiate.

Storm had considered himself, rightly by his standards, to be somewhat of an expert at trailing. But Gorgol was able to pick traces seemingly out of the surface of unmarked rock, guiding them to a thin crevice in the cliff walls where the prints of the frawn's hoofs did show in drying mud. That crevice was narrow to begin with, and it climbed, but not too straightly. Above them Baku quested, sometimes totally lost to sight in the immensity of the sky where she faced no travel obstacles at all.

They came at last to a pocket-sized pass and Gorgol picked from between two rocks there a small hide pouch lined with frawn fabric, smelling of some aromatic herb.

'Faraway men chew – makes powerful dreams –' The Norbie passed the find to the Terran who sniffed inquiringly at the strong odour. It was not unpleasant, but he had never come across it before that he could remember. He was sorry for that ignorance as what he held might be an important clue to the true identity of the outlaws.

'Dream stuff grow on Arzor?' he asked

'Not so. Wizard use some found in Butcher camp. Made head shake – many dreams – evil. It is a spirit thing – not good.'

Storm tucked the find inside his belt. Undoubtedly it was a narcotic of some kind, perhaps with a stronger effect upon the Arzoran natives than upon the original off-world users.

'Through here – with horses –'

A small patch of earth was indented plainly by the prints of horsehoofs, though these were later overlaid with the frawn tracks bound in the other direction. And all the horses had been shod, proving they were not Norbie stock.

On the other side of the pass they found the reason for the wandering of the frawn, a yoris kill, the white bones of a full-grown frawn picked clean. But the killer had not profited greatly, though it had gone to its own death with a full paunch, because the huge lizard lay there too, its sickly yellow corpse thriftily skinned and left as a feast for a pack of small scavengers.

Gorgol slipped from one cover rock to the next, losing little of his agility because of the arm bound across his chest, venturing at length to squat beside that unsavoury carcass as the feasters fled. When Storm joined him the Norbie pointed to the reptile's head.

That was a disturbing sight, not because the whole top of the saurian skull was completely missing, but because the Terran knew only one weapon that could cause a death wound such as that. And it was one completely outlawed at the end of the war.

'A slicer!' he breathed. More evidence that his wild guess of yesterday had some base in fact. He glanced at the bow in his own hand and grimaced. A bow against a stun ray was not too impossible odds – but a

bow opposed to a slicer was no odds at all – in favour of the man equipped with the slicer!

The Norbie rose to his feet and looked around him. He picked up a stick and thrust it under that wreck of a head, turning up the skull to pry at the lower jaw. Under his probing a sudden stream of greenish liquid fountained high. Gorgol twittered in much the same tone of consternation Hing used upon occasion. Dropping his stick he made finger-talk.

'Yoris' death poison – mating season now.'

That meant that the big, ugly reptiles were twice as vicious and far more deadly. During the mating season each of the males would have effective poison fangs to use against rivals, and yoris' venom was often fatal – at least to off-worlders. From now on they must be prepared to kill the lizards on sight without waiting for any attack.

Leaving the carnage on the small plateau, Storm strode to the rim for a survey of what lay below. The land there presented a surprising vista, though perhaps he should have been prepared, having seen the ruins in the lake valley. As far as Storm could see the cliff walls were cut into a series of giant steps – really terraces – most of which were cloaked – or choked – with thick growths of vegetation. Leading from a point to the south, a road had been cut and cleared from level to level – perhaps the trail along which the outlaws drove their stolen animals. For the pass through which he and Gorgol had just come could not have accommodated a herd of any size.

The Terran unslung his lenses to study in detail the floor of this second valley. It was easy to pick out a sizable frawn herd at graze there, the curious loping gait of the animals making them seem almost top-heavy when they moved because of their heavily maned forequarters and high-held horned heads contrasted to the relatively weak nakedness of their sharply sloping hindquarters free of almost all but a tight fuzz of hair.

Frawns – but no horses. And no signs of riders either. The limiting walls of the valley itself perhaps provided an adequate barrier to drifting and cancelled the need for any herders – though with the yoris season at its height Storm would have considered guards necessary.

This valley was much wider than the outer one and only the lenses allowed Storm to see that the opposite walls were terraced in the same fashion as those below. The grass was luxuriant and high, and there were no signs of the flood that had devastated the neighbouring lowland.

Nor were there any other evidences of what Storm sought. This place might be only a convenient hiding place for stolen herds. If it had not been for the wound on the dead yoris –

Gorgol's hand pressed the Terran's arm. Obedient to that warning, Storm turned his lenses swiftly back to the valley floor. The frawns were no longer grazing. Instead the bulls were tossing their heads, galloping awkwardly to the right, while the cows and young were falling back into a tight knot, heads pointing outward, the typical defence position of their species.

Horsemen! Three of them. And the horses they rode were a dark-skinned stock, a different breed from those of Larkin's string, wiry, smaller animals, such as those Storm had seen in the Norbie camp. However, the men who rode them were not natives. Nor did they wear the almost universal Arzoran settler dress of yoris-hide breeches and frawn-fabric shirts.

Storm went down on one knee, swinging around to follow that group of riders with his powerful glasses. His first sight of those dull black tunics – the black that always looked as if it were coated with grey dust

– had confirmed all his suspicions. This was it! Those enemy uniforms, the hidden business in stolen frawns, everything clicked together with a satisfying snap. No wonder they had wiped out the Survey party, striving at the same time to make the deed seem a native massacre! Blame everything on the wild Norbies. A beautiful cover, a situation made to order for the Xiks.

'Saaaa –' Gorgol had learned to imitate the call Storm used for the team, the only sound he had in common with the Terran. The native was energetically stabbing his forefinger into the air northward in a demand for Storm to shift his attention to that point.

The frawns were still bunched, not relaxing their vigilance. However, their very ordinary reaction to the invasion of their feeding grounds was not what interested the native. Some of the force of the storm had stripped a path down the mountain, clearing a haphazard lane of yellow-red earth that ended in a mound on the next to the last terrace. And, hugging that, almost indistinguishable from the ground on which he lay, another was watching the same scene. With the aid of Storm's lenses that spy leaped into full view, and the Terran saw the long, lean body of a Norbie who must be completely concealed from sight as far as anyone on the floor of the valley was concerned. There was something odd about the fellow's head. Those horns, curving back across the hairless pate, they were not ivory white as Gorgol's, as those of all the other Norbies Storm had seen, but dyed a blue-green,

He looked to Gorgol for enlightenment. The young Norbie had flattened himself out on an overhanging rock from which he could get the fullest view of the other native, his chin supported on the injured arm, his features impassive, but his cat-eyes were much alive. Then his lips drew flat against his teeth in the humourless grin that signified anger or battle excitement among his kind, and his other hand, resting on the rock next to the Terran, made the finger-sign for Nitra.

Was that a hidden scout travelling alone? Or did he act as the advance ranger for a war party? Norbie custom allowed for either answer. A youngster out on a personal hunt for a warrior trophy could prospect these ranges on his own. Or a raiding party might have marked down this hidden valley and its secret herds and decided to make the Butchers their prey. From these terraces with their thick cover an ambush attack by expert bowmen could cause a good deal of trouble.

Gorgol's fingers moved again. 'One only –'

Though the Terran could not speak Gorgol's language, nor the native do more than imitate the team call, Storm had discovered that he could convey information in a sketchy way, or ask a question with extravagant movements of his lips and be half-understood. He held his lenses still but turned his head to ask:

'War party?'

Gorgol dipped his chin and moved his head from side to side in emphatic negation.

'One only.'

Storm longed for Surra. He could have set the dune cat to shadow that warrior, make sure in her own way that he was the only one of his kind along the terraces. Now the Terran's own plan for trailing those three riders must be revised. Without Surra to run interference it would be folly to venture down into the lower reaches of the valley and perhaps be cut off from the pass. Yet he wanted to see where those riders were headed.

The Terran worked his way along the small plateau, passing once more the very dead yoris, to reach the

northernmost tip. There he dared to get to his feet and lean back against a rust-red finger of rock, sure that he was a part of the stone to anyone who was more than a few rods away.

This valley was surely a wide expanse, roughly in the outline of a bottle, of which the south was the narrowest part. And the outlaws could, and probably had, camouflaged everything at ground level. He could pick out no buildings, no indication that this was anything but virgin wilderness.

Except for that one thing planted there, stiffly upright, sending small sparks of reflected sunlight through a masking of skilfully wrought drapery, a piece of work that made Storm grant those below very full marks.

He judged that sky-pointing length narrowly, knowing that its landing fins must now be sunk well below the surface of the meadowland. That meant that a great amount of labour had been expended – as well as pointing to the fact that the pilot who had ridden down his ship's tail flames into that constricted area had been a very expert one. From the appearance of the drapery it must have been some time since the ship had been landed and apparently built into the general surroundings. If he could see the thing stripped, he might be able to identify the type – though with that slender outline it was no cargo carrier – Storm believed it might be a scout or a very fast courier and supply ship, the kind a man might latch onto during the break-up immediately before surrender for a fast getaway. Whatever its kind, Storm knew that on its scarred side he would find only one symbol. But was he now spying on a secret and well-established colony, set up while the Xiks were still powerful, or just a hideaway for holdouts who had fled the order to lay down their arms?

Gorgol came up beside him. 'Nitra go –' He flicked a finger north. 'Maybeso hunt for trophies –' His hand remained outspread, his gaze centred on the half-hidden ship. Then his head snapped around and his astonishment was very plain to read.

'What?' he signed.

'Faraway sky thing.' Storm used the native term for space ship.

'Why here?' countered Gorgol.

'Butchers – evil men bring –'

Again the thin-lipped fighting grin of Norbie anger stretched Gorgol's mouth.

'Faraway sky thing no come Norbie land.' He strained the fingers of his right hand to join the left in making that protest 'Norbie drink blood faraway men – talk straight – swear oaths of warriors. Faraway ship thing only come one place on land – not near mountains where Those-Who-Drum-Thunder be angry! Faraway men not talk straight – here sky thing too!'

Trouble! Storm caught the threat in this. The Norbies allowed the space port to be located well away from the mountains that to them were sacred. And the treaty that had made the settlers' holdings safe to them allowed only that one place of landing and departure for off-world ships. To let the rumour get started that there was a second port right in the heart of their mountains would be enough to break every drink-blood tie on Arzor.

Storm let his lenses swing from their strap, held out his hands to focus Gorgol's attention.

'I warrior –' He underlined that statement by drawing his index finger along the faint scar line on his shoulder. 'Gorgol warrior –' With the same finger he touched the other's bandaged forearm gently. 'I get

warrior scar, not from Nitra, not from other tribe like mine – I get wound fighting evil men –of that tribe!' He made a spear of his finger, stabbing the air toward the grounded space ship. 'Gorgol wounded by those evil men – from there!' Again he pointed. 'They are of those who eat THE MEAT –' He added the worst symbol the sign language contained.

Gorgol's yellow eyes held the Terran's unblinkingly before he signed:

'Do you swear this by Those-Who-Drum-Thunder?'

Storm drew his knife from his belt, pushing its hilt into the Norbie's hand and then drew it up by the blade until the point pricked the skin encircled in the necklace on his breast.

'Let Gorgol push this home if he does not believe I speak true,' he signed slowly with his free hand.

The Norbie drew back the knife, reversed it with a flip of his wrist and proffered the hilt to the Terran. As Storm took the blade from him, he replied, 'I believe. But this – bad thing. Faraway man fight evil men his kind – or oath broken.'

'It is so. What I can do, I shall. But first we must know more of these men –'

Gorgol looked down into the valley. 'Nitra hunts – and the night comes. In the day we can move better – you have not the eyes that see in darkness –'

Storm knew an inward relief. If the Norbie had wanted to keep up with the scout, now it would have been hard not to agree. But this suggestion coming from the native fitted in with the Terran's own wishes.

'Big cat –' Storm suggested, 'get well – be able to hunt Nitra while we watch evil men –'

Gorgol agreed to that readily, having seen Surra in action. And with a last detailed examination of the concealed ship, which told him no more than he had learned earlier, Storm started back to the outer valley, to plan an active campaign.

10

Although it was close to dark when they returned to the outer valley, Storm set about building a screen of rocks behind which they could shelter a night fire, with Gorgol's one-handed aid. There was, of course, the cave in which he had been imprisoned. But that was the width of the valley away. And, in addition, he shrank from experiencing again its turgid air and the faint exhalation of stale death he recalled only too vividly.

Rain had been turned loose to graze. Should the stallion be sighted from the heights by any lurking Nitra or outlaw sentry he would be thought a stray from the destroyed Survey camp. And with Surra on guard there was no danger of a thief getting close enough to steal the mount. Perhaps he could even be used as bait in some later plan.

Storm suggested as much to Gorgol and the Norbie agreed with enthusiasm. Such a horse as Rain was a treasure – a chief's mount – a trophy to be flaunted in the faces of lesser men.

There remains the road –' Storm's fingers moved in the firelight after they had eaten. The path that we found today is not for herd-driving. We must discover their other road –'

'Such a way does not lie through this valley,' Gorgol answered with conviction.

Their explorations before the flash flood seemed to confirm that. The Survey party had discovered no evidence of fawn-grazing around the mounds. Storm drew his knife and with the point began to scratch out a map of the valley as he knew it – in its relation to the outlaws' hold. He explained as he went and the Norbie, used to his own form of war and hunting maps, followed with concentration, correcting, or questioning.

When they had pooled their knowledge of the terrain Storm could see only one explanation for the lack of a connecting link between the valleys – save for the narrow cleft they had explored that day. There must be a way from the southeast or southwest, running between the heights that separated the two cups of lowland.

'In dark – Nitra maybe raid –' Gorgol had been watching their handful of fire thoughtfully. 'In dark Norbie see good –night raid big trick on enemy – good against Butchers.' He glanced at Storm. 'You no see so good in dark –? Maybeso not. But cat – she does!'

The Terran aroused at that half-hint for more immediate action. Norbie scouts would not hang about the outlaw camp too long. The Nitra they had sighted on watch today might well hole up for the first part of the night and then raid the horses of the Xik hideout in the early hours of the morning, a favourite trick of the natives. If a man were on the spot, then he could learn a lot in the ensuing confusion.

However, it was a very thin chance, depending so much on luck and on factors over which Storm had no control. He had taken slim chances before and had been successful. This was like the old days. A well-remembered prickle ran along the Terran's nerves, and he did not know it but the yellow light of the flames gave him something of the look of Surra, Surra when she crouched before taking off in deadly spring.

'You will go.' Gorgol signed. 'We shall try for the lower way now – wait then for the zamle's hour –'

'You too?'

The Norbie's thin grin was answer enough, but his fingers added:

'Gorgol is now a warrior. This is a good trail with much honour on it. I go – seeing ahead our path –'

They ate of the fawn meat methodically. And to that more

tasty food Storm added two of the small concentrate tablets from his service days. If they had to go without food for a full day or more, they would not feel the lack.

He gave Surra her silent orders, noting that the dune cat moved with much of her old strength and litheness, and swung Hing on his shoulder. Night exploits were not for Baku, but the Terran knew that with the coming of light the eagle would be up and questing. Should her aid be required then he could summon her.

They reclimbed the fawn pass and came out once more upon the plateau. Surra charged forward and something half her size scuttled away from the body of the yoris, leaving a musky odour almost as strong as the hunting reptile's stench hanging in the air. The dune cat coughed, spat angrily, plunging on into the growth below as if she must wipe that contagion from her fur.



Storm had to admit to himself within five minutes that, had it not been for Surra and the Norbie's excellent night sight, he would have had to call off his ambitious plan. The thick growth on the ancient terraces cut off the sky, doubled the gloom of the night. He locked hands with Gorgol, his other arm protecting Hing against his body lest she be swept from her hold by low-swinging branches. But somehow, with raw scratches on his face and the welts of lashing boughs crisscrossing his shoulders and ribs, Storm made it to the floor of the valley.

By day he could have used the terraces for cover, and indubitably now both cat and Norbie could have taken that way with ease. But the Terran knew he must keep to the fringe of the open land or give up entirely. Luckily the frawns would bed down for the night well out in the open. Though they would gallop away from a mounted man, to meet them on foot was a different matter, as Dort and Ransford warned him during his early days on Arzor. Frawns were curious and they were hostile, especially in calving season. A man fronted by a suspicious bull and caught afoot was in acute danger.

It was not until they were almost in line with the disguised ship that Storm saw the first light. Perhaps long immunity had made someone careless. But that prick showed clearly from the base of one huge peak whose bulk furnished the major northern wall of the second valley. And there was no mistaking the nature of that blue glare. It was cast by no fire or atom-powered lamp such as the settlers used, but was a type of installation Storm had seen before, half the galaxy away.

Using the grounded ship as a mark point, the Terran fixed the general location of that bright dot. Then he pressed his fingers to Gorgol's wrist, giving the Norbie's arm a slight jerk in one of the simple signals they had agreed to use in the dark. Gorgol's fingers tightened on his twice in assent and Storm dropped his hold, getting down to his knees, with Hing now riding crouched low on his back and Surra to act as his advance guard.

Leaving the Norbie in the screen of bushes, the three worked their way into the open, making for the vicinity of the ship. Luckily the frawns had not grazed this section, and the rank grass grew so high that Storm had to rise from hands and knees at intervals to be sure he was on course. But he came at last to the edge of a pit.

Under his exploring hands the earth was wet, the clay very recently disturbed. He wriggled forward until his head and shoulders projected over the drop, and aimed his torch on its lowest power into the emptiness below. He was right, the digging was recent and it was not yet finished, for only half of the soil had been cleared away from around the fins of the ship. The cruiser had been buried after it had been landed, partly to help conceal it, partly to keep it steady in a proper position for a take-off where there was no cradle to hold it. If a storm here had battered it off fin level, with no port cranes to right it, the ship would be useless scrap until it rusted away.

But this digging now meant that it was about to be recommissioned. Storm wished he knew more about its type. He moved the torch from the nearest half-unearthed fin upward to the body. All ports were sealed. His light went back to the fins again. Had he still been able to order both Ho and Hing, a little judicious excavation under one fin to overbalance the other two, he might have caused trouble enough to spoil Xik plans. But the job below was too big for one meerkat, no matter how willing, in the limited time granted them tonight.

Hing had plans of her own. Scrambling down from Storm's shoulders she patted the soft earth approvingly with her digging paws and half-rolled, half-coasted down into the pit of shadows about the excavation where she went to work vigorously, snorting with disgust when Storm called her back. And she took her own time about obeying, sputtering angrily as she climbed, avoiding the Terran's hand as he would have pulled her to him again.

He tried to restore her good will with an order. She consented grumpily and then chirruped in a happier frame of mind as she scuttled off to the first of the net ties, digging at the stake that held it. There was just a faint chance that the tightly drawn net itself helped to steady the ship in the pit, now that the digging was in progress, and to release the main ropes could rock it off centre. Any gamble was worth the effort and this was something the meerkat could do.

Storm made his retreat to the terraces backwards, pulling up as best he could the grass he had beaten down. He could not erase all traces of his visit, but what could be done to confuse the trail he did. Surra's paw marks threading back and over his would make a queer pattern for any tracker to unravel, since no native Arzoran creature would leave that signature.

As Storm came back to the bushes Gorgol met him and they locked hands once more, the Norbie giving him a squeeze to indicate he had discovered a hideout. It proved to be a small hollow between two sections of terrace wall that had given way long ago under the impetus of landslips, and they crouched there together with Surra – to be joined sometime later by Hing who nudged at Storm's arm until he accepted some treasure she was carrying in her mouth and cuddled her to him.

They would wait, they had decided, until dawn. If there was no disturbance engineered by the Nitra before that hour, there would be none later. Of course, the scout they had seen that afternoon might have decided that the hideout was too tough a proposition. Storm dozed, as he had learned to sleep between intervals of action, but he was halfway to his feet when a flaming ball arched across the sky – to be followed by another – and then a third.

The first fire arrow struck on fuel and a burst of flame flashed up. Storm heard the high, frightened scream of a horse as the third ball landed. The fire was burning along a line perhaps five feet above the level of the ground – it could be following the top of some wall or corral. Wall or corral – he remembered a precaution Larkin had used on two different nights along the trail when yoris attacks were to be feared – a temporary corral topped with thornbushes to keep the scaled killers at bay. And dried thorn burned very easily.

The shrill whinnies and squeals of the horses were answered by shouts. The distant prick of light they had spotted earlier suddenly grew into a wide slit that must mark an open door.

Gorgol moved, scraping by Storm with a brief tap of a message on the Terran's shoulder. The milling horses had been freed from the burning corral somehow, the thud of hoofs on the ground, as they raced from the fire, carried to the two in hiding. And the Norbie was about to take advantage of the confusion to catch a mount. The native had the stun rod and so was better prepared to defend himself in the darkness where Storm's bow was largely useless.

Now they both heard a high yammering cry that had been torn from no off-world throat – a Nitra in trouble? Yet surely the native would be busy among the horses racing from the blazing corral. The thornbush fire lit up a whole scene as men ran across the area around it, covering the ground in zigzag advance patterns that told Storm all he needed to know about their past activities. Those were troops who had known action, snapping into defence positions with veterans' ease and speed.

Then a light that swallowed up the glow of the fire snapped on – to make a sweeping path reaching almost to the ship. The beam moved, catching and centring on running horses. And did one of those have a figure crouched low on its back? Storm was not sure, but the mount he thought suspicious did dodge out of the line of the light with almost intelligent direction.

Again the light tried to catch the horses, but this time they were not so closely bunched, spreading out – two or three taking the lead by lengths from the others.

There was a crack of sky-splitting thunder and purple fire lashed up from the sod to the far left. Storm's teeth clicked together, he was on his feet, Surra pressed tight against his thigh, snarling in red rage. That was not new either, they had both seen that whip of destruction in action before, lashing out to herd fugitives, only that time the fugitives had not been horses! Gorgol! If he could only call the Norbie back to safety. This was no time to try to catch one of those maddened animals, not with someone using a force beam so expertly. And the native knew nothing of Xik weapons or their great range.

The Terran went down on one knee. He was loath to risk Surra, but he must give Gorgol a chance. With his hands resting lightly on the dune cat's shoulders, his thumbs touching the bases of her large sensitive ears, Storm thought his order. Find the Norbie – bring him back –

Surra growled deep in her throat and the force beam struck again – this time to the right. Their safety would depend on how far the operator could revolve his beam base, or the full extent of its power. A skilful gunner made force lashing an art and Storm had seen incredible displays of Xik-held worlds.

The cat strained a little against his touch. She had her briefing and was ready to go. Storm lifted his hands and Surra disappeared into the high grass. The air tickled his throat, carrying with it the stench of burning where that man-made lightning had left only scorched earth, black and bare.

Now the first of the horses ran past him – another, a third. He could see them only as moving shadows. Let them pound on at that mad pace into the fawn herd and they would start a real stampede. If only Surra could get Gorgol back –!

Again the power beam slapped the earth, making eyes ache with its burst of force. Horses wheeled, ran back from that horror – but the three leaders had gotten through. And had one of them carried a rider? Gorgol – Where was the Norbie – and Surra? To be caught out there was to be in peril not only from the crack of the lightning flash, but also from the horses now racing in a mad frenzy. There was no possible hope of capturing any one of them.

Storm set himself to watch the play of the beam, trying to judge the farthest extent of its reach. Unless the operator was purposely keeping it keyed to a low frequency, it did not touch near the ship, nor hit the terraced slopes behind the Terran. If the Norbie would only return, they could climb to safety. Storm, as resourceful as he was, had a very healthy respect for the weapons of the enemy.

The slaps of the beam were coming closer together, cutting in a regular fan pattern from their source. It would appear that the operator of the machine was now under orders to work over the whole meadowland between the western wall of the mountain and the ship. The Terran's hands jerked toward his ears as the terrible tortured scream of an animal in dire pain answered one flash. They must be deliberately cutting down the horses! The use of the lash had not been just to stop their getaway!

Were the Xiks sacrificing their own animals to get any Norbies who might be trying to round up the runaways? That form of sadistic revenge went well with the character of the enemy as he knew it. Storm fought down his wave of rage, made himself stand and watch that slaughter, adding it to the already huge score he had long ago marked up against the breed of alien men out there, if you could even deem them 'men'.

Horses continued to die and Storm could not control the shudders that answered each agonized cry from the meadow. Surra! Surra and Gorgol. He did not see how they could escape unless they already had

won to the terraces.

King cried, digging her claws into his skin, her shivering body pressed tight to his chest. Then Storm jumped backward and – in a moment – felt immense relief when soft warm fur pressed against him and Surra's rough tongue rasped his flesh. He fondled her ears in welcome and then caught out in the dark, his fingers scraping across yoris hide – Gorgol's corselet.

The Norbie swung around, only a very dimly seen bulk, bringing his other side against the Terran. He was half-supporting another body, slighter, shorter than his own. Storm's hand was on fawn skin fabric in rags, on flesh, on a belt like his. The rescued one was no tribesman, but someone in settler dress.

Storm located that other's dangling arm and hitched it across his shoulders so that now Gorgol and he shared the weight between them. As they made their way onto the first terrace the limp stranger roused somewhat and tried to walk, though his stumbling progress was more of a hindrance than a help to his supporters.

They struggled up two terraces, pausing for breath at forced intervals. The clamour in the meadow was stilled now, though the force beam still beat methodically back and forth. Nothing lived there – it could not – yet it seemed the Xiks were not yet satisfied.

A third terrace, one more and they would be on a level with the pass. The stranger muttered, and once or twice moaned. Though he did not seem fully conscious and had never replied coherently to Storm's questions, he was more steady on his feet and obeyed their handling docilely.

To climb the terraces and then to force one's way along them was a difficult task. And had not the vegetation proved to be thinner near the upper rim of the valley they might have been held to a dangerously slow pace. The sky was grey when they reached the edge of the plateau where the dead yoris had lain. Surra glided back to give the alert. There was danger standing between them and the pass.

If he could be sure that only a Norbie opposed them, Storm would have given the big cat the order she wanted and let her clear the way. But an Xik outlaw armed with a slicer or some other of their ghastly array of weapons was more than the Terran would let her risk meeting. Storm signed caution to Gorgol to take to cover, working his way on to the pass alone.

Again Surra's acute hearing had saved them. There was a guard stationed there right enough. And he had holed up, well protected in a rock niche, taking a position from which he could sweep the whole approach. There was no advancing until he was somehow picked out of that shell. Storm squatted behind a rock of his own and studied the field. It was plain to him now that the outlaws had been willing to sacrifice their horse herd to insure the death of someone. And a quick process of elimination suggested that that someone was the stranger Gorgol had rescued. He might even be the same man the Norbie had seen earlier in Xik hands, on the day they had accounted for the Survey party.

Doubtless every way out of the valley was now under guard. The next logical move for the enemy would be to start a careful combing of the terraces, driving their prey toward one of the known exits and so straight into the blaster sights of the men stationed there. It was a systematic arrangement that Storm, though it was used against him now, could approve as an example of good planning. But then the Xik forces could never be accused of stupidity.

Who was this stranger – that his recapture was of such great importance? Or was it a case like that of the murder of the Survey people – a killing ordered because no one who knew of this base could be allowed to escape? The why was not important now. What was important was that Storm and those with him win

past this check point before that drive started down in the valley or before the one man now ahead could be reinforced.

He had one good trick left. If it worked! Storm's head went down until it rested on his crooked arm. He closed his eyes to the plateau. But he held in his mind the picture of the enemy guard in his rock post – making it as vivid as he could. Clinging to that image, the Terran drew upon that other sense he had never tried to name, launching a demanding call. Surra he was sure of. Hing could be controlled only by hand and voice, her sly mind touching his on the far edge of the band that united the team. But Baku – now he must reach the eagle. She would be up in the air at dawn, cruising for sight of him. If he could attract her by that unvoiced call –!

That tenuous thing that he could not rightly call power but which tied him to cat, eagle, and meerkats, centred now on that one purpose. For so long they had been united in their life and efforts that surely the bond had been strengthened until he could rely upon it now for the only help that would mean anything to them. Baku – come in, Baku! Storm sent that strong soundless call up into the grey-mauve sky, a sky he did not see except as a place that might hold a wheeling black eagle.

11

Baku – Storm's will became a cord – a noose tossed high in the lighting heavens to find and draw down that wide-winged shape. Once before, more than a Terran year earlier, he had summoned the great eagle to a similar task and she had obeyed, with all the power in her fearless body and those raking talons. Now – could he do it again?

Surra crowded against him, he could feel through fur and flesh the tension of the cat's nervous body, as if she had joined her untamed will to his, strengthening his calling. Then the dune cat growled, so almost noiselessly that Storm felt rather than rightly heard that warning.

The Terran raised his head from his arm, opened his eyes to the morning sky. It seemed to him that he had been using his will for hours, but the space of time could not have been more than a few moments. The Xik guard was still there, still half-crouched by one of the rocks he had chosen for his improvised fort, staring downslope, slightly to Storm's left.

'Ahuuuuuuu!' That cry might have been a scream from the furred throat of one of Surra's large kin. Once it had been the war shout of a desert people, now it summoned the team to battle.

The strike of a falcon or eagle is a magnificent piece of precision flying. It is also one of the most deadly attacks in the world. The guard at the pass could have had a second of apprehension, but only a second, before those talons closed in his flesh, the beak tore at his eyes, and the wings beat him close to senselessness.

Storm sped from one side, Surra from the other. The attack was all over in moments. And the Terran stripped from the other's body those weapons that would go a long way to insure the safety of his own party. Then he dragged the body of the guard along to thrust it into a crevice where it would lie hidden unless there were a detailed search. No man would now recognize the badly torn features, but Storm did not need to see that faintly green skin, the welling blood that was a different colour from his own, to identify the species of the dead man. The Xiks were humanoid – perhaps more so in appearance than the Norbies, setting aside such small differences as colour of skin and texture of hair. But there was a kinship of feeling between the horned and hairless Norbies and the Terran-descended settlers, which could never exist between man and Xik. So far no common meeting ground with the ruthless invaders had been discovered, in spite of patient search. And though they could and did mouth each other's speech

understandably, there was no communication between his species and the Xiks that reached below surface exchange of information. Dramatically opposed aims drove the two peoples. Failure upon disastrous failure had followed every contact between them.

The Terran could not control his instinctive aversion as he dragged the body into hiding – and that feeling was far more than his dread of touching the dead – just as he could not and had not tried to smother the rage that ate into him that night before when he had been forced to witness the cold-blooded torture slaying of the horses. There was no understanding the invader mind. One could only guess at the twisted motives that drove them to do the things they did. The destruction of Terra had been one result of their kind of warfare – and perhaps it was just as useless as the continued carnage in the meadow below, for spread throughout the galaxy in numberless colonies the Terran breed had survived the destruction of their first home, while here the prisoner the Xik had thought to catch in the power net was now also on his way to safety.

Gorgol had only been waiting to have their path cleared. Already he was moving at the best pace he could force his charge to maintain across the plateau to the pass itself. The Norbie's greater height was pulled to one side as he supported the wavering stranger. And Storm, having set Surra and Baku to scout duty and having slung the plundered blaster over his shoulder, hurried to lend a hand.

In the increasing daylight it was easy to see that the rescued man had been brutally handled. But not as badly as some captives Storm had helped to release from Xik prison camps. And the very fact that he was able to keep on his feet at all was in his favour. But when Storm came up to steady the shuffling body, Gorgol allowed the full support to shift to the Terran. He had pulled his wounded arm out of its sling, and now he signed swiftly:

'Horses – free – on the side trail. We shall need them – I bring –'

Before Storm could protest he sped away. They could use the mounts right enough. But the sooner they were safe out of this sinister valley, the better. And goodness only knew how far the beaters in that drive for the fugitive had advanced below. The Terran kept on through the pass, staggering a little under the lurching weight of the stranger.

Surra he stationed in the pass. If Gorgol did flush horses up that narrow trail, she would help to herd them in. The big cat was tiring, but she was able to do sentry duty awhile, while Baku would provide them with eyes overhead. King scampered along before them, pausing now and then to turn over some flat stone and nose out an interesting find.

A band of aching muscles began to tighten about Storm's legs, his breath came in short, hard gulps that ended in a sharp stitch in his side. Must be out of condition, he thought impatiently – too long at the Centre. He tried to plan ahead. Their camp on the gravel bar was too exposed – and they could not push the stranger too far into exhaustion, even if Gorgol did produce horses to ride. That meant they must discover a hiding place down in the flooded valley.

Storm knew of only one, much as he disliked it, the cave into which Rain had blundered during the cloudburst. That lay to the east of the pass they now threaded, perhaps a mile from the gravel bed. Surely the water had fallen well below its entrance now. Water – Storm ran a dry tongue over drier lips and turned his thoughts resolutely from the subject of water.

There would be no time to rest in the camp – just gather together their few supplies and mount the stranger on Rain, then get moving at once. And now Gorgol's try for horses no longer seemed so reckless. If successful, it would make very good sense. That is – if the poor brutes hadn't been run until

they were almost foundered. Mounts could mean the difference between disaster and safety for the fugitives.

'You're – not – Norbie –' Though the words came in slow pauses from those cut and battered lips, they startled Storm. He had been unconsciously considering his companion as so much baggage that had to be supported and tended, but that had no individual will. To be addressed intelligently by the stranger surprised him.

The face half-turned to his was a mass of cuts and bruises, so well painted with dried blood that it was hard to guess at the fellow's normal features. Nor did Storm realize that his own attempt at camouflage war paint did almost as well to make him equally a mystery.

'Terran –' He replied with the truth and heard a little gasp from the other, which might have been in answer to that statement or because the stranger stumbled and slapped one dangling hand inadvertently against an outcrop.

'You – know – who – they – are –?'

Storm needed no better identification for that 'they'. 'Xiks!' he returned tersely, using the very unflattering service term for the invaders.

The explosive sound of that word was echoed by the walls of the pass, but above it sounded the pounding of hoofs. Since Surra had given no warning, Gorgol must have been successful. Storm drew the stranger back against the wall and waited.

It would have taken an expert horseman to see any value in the three animals that picked their way down the slope, their heads hanging, the marks of dried foam on them, their eyes glazed. None could be called upon for any great effort now, save that of keeping on its feet and moving. But Gorgol strode after them, the ivory of his horns glowing in the growing light of the morning as he held his head high in this small triumph. He clapped his hands together, the small report loud enough to turn the weary shuffle of his charges into a limited trot. Then leaving them to drift on downslope to the outer valley, he came to help Storm with his charge.

'You have had good hunting!' the Terran congratulated him.

'No time – or hunting – would have been better. The Butchers are foolish – few horses are left to them now – but still they do not try to round them up –' Gorgol replied before he used his hands for the purpose of aiding the injured man.

With the Norbie to take half the burden, the three covered the rest of the distance to the floor of the valley in better time. The horses, too exhausted to graze, stood with drooping heads, while Rain cantered up, full of interest, to inspect the newcomers. Beside the overdriven trio the stallion was a fine sight as he stood, pawing at the sod with one forehoof, the wind pulling at his red mane and forelock.

'That – is – all – horse!' The battered stranger had come to a halt, half-braced against his supporters, but the eyes in his pulped face were all for Rain.

'Think you can stick on him?' questioned Storm. 'Sorry, fella, but we'll have to keep moving for a while.'

'Can – try –'

Together Norbie and Terran boosted their rescued man up on the nervous stallion. He tried to crook his fingers into the mane for a hold and failed. And Storm, seeing for the first time the condition of those fingers, snapped a few sharp and biting words in the native tongues of at least two worlds.

There was a ghost of an answering laugh from the other. 'All that and more,' he mouthed. They play pretty rough, those Xiks of yours, Terran. Once – a long time ago – I thought I was tough –'

He slumped so suddenly that Storm could not have saved him from falling off Rain's back. But the Norbie moved more quickly.

'He is hurt –'

Storm did not need to be told that. That way –' he pointed.

'Beyond the mound where Dagotag and the others lie – a cave in the cliff wall –'

Gorgol nodded, steadying the stranger's now limp body while Storm went ahead, Rain obediently following him.

They located the cave and Storm left the stranger with the Norbie and Hing, then rode back to collect their supplies. On the return trip he was accompanied by Surra and hazed before him the horses from the other valley, knowing that the two mares and the yearling colt would be protected by Rain. And with the stallion alert they would not stray too far from the new camp after they recovered their normal strength.

Gorgol met him at the cave entrance with news he had not expected – which a week earlier would have been exciting.

This Sealed Cave once.' Taking Storm by the arm, the native drew him farther in to point out the unmistakable marks of tools on roof and walls. He waved his hand toward the darkness beyond. 'Hidden place – go far in –'

Would the Norbie refuse to stay here now, Storm wondered wearily. The Terran was too exhausted himself to care. Knowing that if he so much as sat down he would not be able to fight off sleep, Storm packed in the supplies and then went to look at the stranger. Stretched out on the floor of the cave, his head pillowed on a blanket roll, the Arzoran seemed to have shrunk in a curious way. His bruised face rested against the blanket, his breath caught a little now and then as if he were a child who had cried himself to sleep.

Storm sent Gorgol for water to be boiled over the fire the native had built, and laid out the supplies from the aid kit. Then delicately, with all the gentleness he could muster, he went to work, first to wash away the blood from those battered features, and then to assess the rest of the stranger's injuries. The other moaned once or twice under the Terran's ministrations, but he did not come to full consciousness.

At the end of a good half-hour's work Storm drew a deep breath of relief. Judging by Xik standards, they had hardly started to use their unpleasant methods of breaking a prisoner. It would be several days before the stranger would have full use of his hands, the lash weals on his back and shoulders would also be tender at least that long, and his face would display a rainbow-coloured mask for some time. But there were no bones broken, no disabling wounds.

Leaving his patient as comfortable as possible, Storm went down to the lake, stripped, washed from head to foot, coming back to roll up in a blanket and sleep with the complete surrender of sodden



exhaustion.

A tantalizing smell pulled him at last out of the mazes of a dream in which he ran across gradually rising mountains in pursuit of an Xik ship that, oddly enough, fled on human legs and twice turned to look at him with the face of Brad Quade. And he sat up to see Gorgol toasting grass hens on peeled spits over a fire. The process was watched with close attention by a mixed audience of Hing, Surra, and the stranger, now very much aware of his surroundings and sitting up backed by a brace of saddle pad and supply boxes.

Outside it was night, but they saw little of that save a patch of sky framing a single star, for the barrier once left by the landslip had been partly restored to mask their camp from anyone who did not have Baku's powers of elevation. And Baku, as if Storm's thought had once more summoned her, stirred now on a perch on the top of that barrier where she sat staring out on the valley.

But it was the rescued stranger who drew most of Storm's attention. He had been too tired, too absorbed in the task at hand when he had worked over the other, to really look objectively at the man whose wounds he tended. Now, in spite of the bruises, the bandages and the battering, he noted something that brought him upright, betraying surprise as much as Hosteen Storm could ever register it.

Because beneath the bruises, the bandages, the temporary alterations left by Xik treatment, Storm knew those features. He was facing now not just one of his own general human kind, but a man – a very young man – of his own race! Somehow – by some strange juggling of fate – he was confronting across this dusky cave another of the Dineh.

And the other's eyes, the only part of him that was not Dineh – those startling blue eyes – were focused back on the Terran with the same unwavering look of complete amazement. Then the swollen lips moved and that other asked his question first:

'Who, in the name of Seven Ringed Thunders, are you?'

'Hosteen Storm – I am Terran –' He repeated his former self-introduction absently.

The other raised a bandaged hand clumsily to his own jaw and winced as it touched the swelling there.

'You won't believe this, fella,' he said apologetically. 'But before I took this workin' over, you an' I looked somethin' alike!'

'You are of the Dineh –' Storm slipped into the tongue of his boyhood. 'How did you come here?'

The other appeared to be listening intently, but when Storm was finished, he shook his head slowly.

'Sorry – that's not my talk. I still don't see how I got me a part-twin on Terra. Nor how he turned up to help pull me out of that mess back there. Enough to make you think the smoke drinkers know what they're talkin' about when they say dreams are real –'

'You are —?' Storm, a little deflated by the other's refusal to acknowledge a common speech, asked in a sharper tone.

'Sorry – there's no mystery about that. I'm Logan Quade.'

Storm got up, the firelight touching to life the necklace on his breast, the ketoh on his wrist as he moved. He did not know, and would not have cared, what an imposing picture he made at that moment. Nor

could he guess how the eagerness mirrored in his face a moment earlier had been wiped away, to leave his features set and cold.

'Logan – Quade –' he repeated without accent, evenly. 'I have heard of the Quades –'

The other was still meeting his gaze with equal calmness though now he had to look up to do so.

'You and a lot of others – including our friends back yonder. They seemed to like Quades just about as much as you do, Storm. I can understand their dislike, but when did a Quade ever give you a shove, Terran?'

He was quick, Storm had to grant him that. Too quick for comfort. The Terran did not like this at all. For a moment he felt as if he had a raging fawn bull by the tail, unable either to subdue the animal or to let it free. And that was an unusual feeling of incompetence that he did not find easy to acknowledge.

'You're on the wrong track, Quade. But how did the Xiks pick you up?' It was a clumsy enough change of subject and Storm was ashamed of his ineptitude. To make matters worse he had a well-founded idea that Quade was amused at his stumbles.

They gathered me in with the greatest of ease after settin' up some prime bait,' Logan answered. 'We've a range a little south of the Peaks and our stock has been disappearin' regularly in this direction. Dumaroy and some of the other spread owners around here yammer about Norbies every time they count noses and miss a calf. There've been a lot missin' lately and Dumaroy's talkin' war talk. That sort of thing can blow up into a nasty mess. We've had minor differences with some of the wild tribes right enough, but let Dumaroy and his hotheads go attackin' indiscriminately and we could make this whole planet too hot for anyone who didn't wear horns on his head!

'So – not swallowin' Dumaroy's talk about the terrible, terrible Norbies, I came up to have a look around for myself. I chose the wrong time – or maybe the right, if we consider it from another angle – and found the- trail of a big herd bein' driven straight back into the mountains where they had no business to be. And, bein' slightly stupid as my father likes to point out occasionally, I just followed hoofprints along until I was collared. A simple story – with me the simplest item in it.

Then these gentle Xiks thought maybe I could supply some bits of information that they considered necessary to their future well bein'. Some things I honestly didn't know and, while they were tryin' to encourage my reluctant tongue, somebody pulled a raid on their horse corral and rather disrupted things. I believe that they had considered their situation entirely safe here and that when they were attacked they came unlaced at the seams for a few minutes. I took advantage of a very lucky break and headed for the hills. Then Gorgol here stumbled on me and so – you know the rest.'

He waved a bandaged hand and added in a far more serious tone, 'What you don't know – and what is goin' to hurry us out of here – is that we're sittin' right on the edge of a neat little war. These Xiks have been deliberately stirrin' up trouble to set the settlers and the Norbies at each others' throats. Whether it's just that they thrive on pure meanness, or whether they have some plans of their own that can only be ripened in a war, is anybody's guess. But they are plannin' a full-sized raid on the range below the Peaks, disguised as Norbies. And in turn a couple of raids on Norbie huntin' camps doublin' as settlers. I don't know whether you know about the Nitra tribe or not. But they're not the type any man with any sense excites. And the Xiks have been twistin' their tails regularly – in a manner of speakin' – pushin' them straight into a stampede that might smash every spread on the Peak Range. Get the Norbies mad enough and they'll unite in a continent-wide drive. Then' – he waved his hand again – 'good-by to a pretty decent little world. With all the best intentions in the galaxy the Peace Officers will have to call in the Patrol.

There'll either be guerrilla warfare for years, with the Norbies against everythin' from off-world – or else no Norbies. And since I believe that the Norbies are a pretty fine lot, I'm just a little bit prejudiced. So now we're faced with a big job, fella. We have to try and stop the war before the first shot is really fired!

12

The pattern fitted, not only with the situation as Storm already knew it, but with tactics the Xiks had used elsewhere in the galaxy. The enemy had apparently learned nothing from their defeat, and were starting their old games over again. Did this handful of holdouts believe Arzor was going to furnish them with a nucleus for a new empire? Yet that vision was no more grandiloquent than the one they had always held and that the Confederacy had had to expend every effort to defeat. Storm sighed. There had been no end after all to the conflict that had wiped Terra from the solar map.

'How many Xiks are there?' He was already occupied with the practical side of the matter.

Logan Quade shrugged, let out a little involuntary yelp of pain, and then added:

They kept me busy, a little too busy to count noses. Five in the bunch that first downed me. But all of those weren't alien – at least two were outlaws of our own breed. And there was an officer of sorts in command of the questionin'. Him I want to meet again!' The hands in their bandage mittens moved on Logan's knees. 'I saw maybe a dozen aliens – about half as many outlaws – they don't mix too well –'

They wouldn't.' The Xiks had had human stooges on other worlds, but it was always an uneasy cooperation and seldom worked. 'How many settlers in the Peak country?'

There're seven ranges staked out. Dumaroy's the largest so far. He has his brother, nephew, and twelve riders. Lancin – Artur – he has a smaller holdin' – though his brother's comin' out to join him as soon as he's mustered out of the Service. They have five Norbies ridin' for them. And our range – six Norbies and two riders m' father sent up from the Basin. Maybe ten-twelve men can be combed out of the small outfits. Not a very big army – at least you'll figure that after being with the Confed forces –'

'I've seen successful move-ins accomplished by even fewer,' Storm returned mildly. 'But your Peak people must be pretty well scattered –'

'Just let me get to the first of the line cabins and there'll be a talker to call 'em in. We aren't so primitive as you off-worlders seem to think!'

'And that line cabin – how far away?'

'I'd have to take a looksee from some height around here. This is new territory as far as I'm concerned. I'd guess – maybe two day's easy ridin' – fifteen hours if you pushed with a good mount under you.'

'Rain's about the only one of those we have. And there'll be a pack of Xiks out to nose our trail.' Storm wasn't arguing, he was simply stating the odds as he saw them. 'Also, we haven't yet found a way out of this valley that we can take a horse over. The road in was blocked by a landslide.'

'I don't care how we do it,' Logan fired back. 'But I'm tellin' you, Storm, it has to be done! We can't let Dumaroy and the Norbies mix it up just to please those Xiks! I was born on Arzor and I'm not throwin' this world away if it's at all possible to save it!'

'If it's at all possible to save it –' echoed Storm, the old chill of loss eating into him.

'Yes, you, more than all of us, know what those Xiks can do when they play the game according to their rules.'

Storm turned now to Gorgol and his fingers outlined as much of Logan's story as he could find the proper movements to explain. He ended with the question that meant the most now:

There is a way out of valley for man – horse?'

'If there is – Gorgol find.' The Norbie stripped two of the small birds from his roasting spits, tucked them into a broad leaf and gathered them up. 'I go look –' He scrambled over the barrier and was gone.

'You been long on Arzor?' Logan asked as Storm divided up the other birds and brought Quade's portion to him.

'A little over a month – my time –'

'You've settled down quickly,' the other commented. 'I've seen men born here who can't make finger-talk that fast or accurately –'

'Perhaps it comes easier because my own people once had a sign language to use with strangers. Here – let me manage that.'

The bandaged hands were making clumsy work of eating and Storm sat down beside Logan, to feed him bite by bite from the point of his knife. Surra blinked at them in drowsy content and Hing draped herself affectionately over Logan's outstretched legs.

'Where did you get the animals – they're off-world? And that trained bird of yours – what is it?' the younger man asked as Storm paused to dismember another grass hen.

'I'm a Beast Master – and these are my team. Baku, African Black Eagle, Surra, dune cat, Ring, meerkat. They are all natives of Terra, too. We lost Hing's mate in the flood –'

'Beast Master!' There was open admiration in the tone, even if the battered features could not mirror it. 'Say – what is this Dineh you spoke of earlier –?'

'I thought you did not understand Navajo!' Storm countered.

Now those blue eyes were very bright. 'Navajo,' Logan repeated thoughtfully, as if trying to remember where he might have heard the word before. He put up his mittened hand to the ketoh on Storm's wrist, and then lightly touched the necklace that swung free as the other offered him more food. Those are Navajo, aren't they?'

Storm waited. He had an odd feeling that something important was coming out of this. 'Yes.'

'My father has a bracelet like this one –'

That was the wrong thing, the words pushed Storm into remembering what he had avoided these past few weeks. Involuntarily he jerked away from Logan's hand, got to his feet.

'Your father' – the Terran spoke gently, quietly, very remotely, though there was danger under the veneer

of that tone – 'is not Navajo!'

'And you hate him, don't you?' Logan said without accusation. He might have been commenting upon the darkness of the night without. 'Brad Quade has a lot of enemies – but not your sort of man usually. No, he's not Navajo – he was born on Arzor – but of Terran stock – He is part Cheyenne –'

'Cheyenne!' Storm was startled. It was easier to think of Quade, the enemy, as coming from the old, arrogant, all-white stock who had lied, cheated, pushed his people back and back – though not into the nothingness the white man wanted for them. No – never into nothingness!

'Cheyenne – that's Amerindian –' Logan was starting to explain when he was interrupted.

Surra was on her feet, her drowsy content gone as if she had never sprawled half-asleep a moment earlier. And Storm reached swiftly for the blaster he had taken from the pass guard. It was Xik issue but enough like a Confed weapon for him to use. He only wished he had more than one clip for it, but the invaders must be running low on ammunition themselves.

It was Gorgol who squeezed through and the news he brought was not good. Not only had he been unable to prospect for another exit from the valley, but there was a Nitra war party camped in the southern end of the flooded land, and lights showed to the north along the cliffs.

'The horses,' Storm decided first, 'and water. Get the mounts in here and as much water as we can store. Perhaps we can sit out a search and the Xiks may tangle with those Nitra –'

They worked fast, dousing the fire and widening the opening so that Rain and the three horses from the other valley could be brought into the cave. On their return they found Logan on his feet, using Storm's torch and exploring into the dark tunnel they had all avoided earlier.

'I wonder,' he speculated, 'whether this hole couldn't run on through the mountain. This might not have been one of the regular Sealed Caves but a passage from one valley to the next. You say you got into this valley through a tunnel – well, couldn't this one be the way out?'

But Storm eyed the dark hole in which the beam of the torch was so quickly lost with no favour at all. The air was dead the farther one moved in from the entrance, and he had a feeling that to go into that unknown region would be merely to walk to one's death. Unless he were driven to it he would have no part of such exploration.

'Queer air –' Logan limped on, one supporting hand against the wall. 'Seems to be dead – light plays tricks here too.'

And Storm noticed that the horses were huddling together in the middle of the expanse, showing no desire to push into the tunnel – that Surra avoided the dark mouth of the place and Hing, whose curiosity had led her in the past to the most reckless venturing, did not patter along at Logan's heels, but sat on her haunches, rocking from side to side, her pointed nose high, making snuffling noises of suspicion.

With Gorgol, the Terran set about building up the front of the cave, obliterating hoof prints as far back as the edge of the water. Then they loaded to the brim the three canteens and Gorgol's water carrier of lizard skin. From the edge of the still shrinking lake Storm saw those dots of light along the cliffs. If the Xiks had discovered the body of the guard, they might well be more cautious about advancing in the dark.

It was the middle of the night when the fugitives stopped their work of disguising the cave and crawled into hiding. It seemed to Storm, as he settled down to get what sleep he could, that the inert atmosphere of the place was expelling the fresh air that came in through a small opening they had left. And, when he closed his eyes and could no longer sight that scrap of sky, his imagination presented a picture of his being fastened in some box he could not batter open.

'Sealed Caves' – he had always thought that that name had been given because they were actually walled up. But now he could believe that that which sealed them was inherent in the caves themselves. Reason told Storm that they were doing the best thing now, that if they could stay undercover until he and Gorgol, scouting the hills, found a path out, they would have better than a fifty-fifty chance. But his body was tense, every nerve in him resisted holding up here.

Morning came and the three in hiding discovered that the cave had one good property besides offering concealment – it was cool, while the sun in the valley was a bright glare generating dank heat. Logan wriggled up to share Storm's lookout.

'Big dry's comin' early this year,' he remarked. 'Sometimes works that way when the storms in the mountains are too heavy early in the season. We've more than one reason for gettin' out of here on the gallop.'

'The Survey party crossed a river coming in,' Storm replied. 'High with rainfall, of course, but would it dry up entirely?'

'The Staffa, no. But that runs pretty far south of this region, rises in the East Peak country. I don't know about this other one you mention. To try to make the Staffa and trail it out would just about double your ridin' time and you'd be in the edge of the Nitra raidin' country –'

'Then we had better make our break soon –' Storm stopped almost in mid-word as the fan-shaped piece of valley he could sight from his vantage point was suddenly peopled. Through his lenses those distant figures leaped into clear detail. They were wearing Norbie corselets and boot leggings, but they had not taken the trouble to continue the deception farther than their clothing. That pale greenish skin, the lank, bleached hair hanging in curled rats' tails down to their shoulders in the back, marked two of the riders as Xiks, while their three companions were plainly of the settler race. Two of the latter had bows, but the former were armed with off-world weapons. And one of them bore across his saddle a tube of dead white colour.

Storm had accepted the presence of slicers, the blaster he now half lay upon, the force beam he had seen at its deadly work in the other valley. But still he jibbed at the white tube and what it meant. There were few enough of them, a development produced so close to the end of the war that it had never been in wide use. And certainly the last place the Terran would expect to see it carried casually on horseback was here in the wastes of a frontier planet. Two, captured in outposts so quickly overrun by Confed forces that the defenders had not been able to blow them up and so avoid surrender, had been tested on barren asteroids. And, witnessing the result, the Con-fed command had ordered that all others found were to be destroyed at once.

The tubes could be used, yes – and the results would be disastrous to the enemy before their sights – only there was in addition an unpredictable backlash of energy, though it might not affect the Xiks as adversely as it did the Confed force that tested the weapons. Built on a principle not unlike that of the disrupters, used to dispose of inanimate material, the tubes were far more powerful than any Confed disrupter of three times their size and range.

'More trouble?' Logan asked.

Storm held out the lenses, steadying them for the other.

'See that tube on the second horse – that's the worst trouble I know.' The Terran added what he had heard about that weapon.

'Coin' to make sure of somebody – or somebodies,' commented the Arzoran dryly. 'I don't particularly care for Nitra warriors. We've had our differences, and until you have a Nitra double-barbed arrow cut out of you, fella, you don't know just how much you can sweat over a little knife work. No – I've never felt kindly toward Nitras. But any disputes we've had have been on a more or less even basis. Usin' that tube against Norbies's more like puttin' up a grass hen against your Surra and tyin' the hen's feet into the bargain.'

Storm made signs for Gorgol, repeating as well as he could the information about the Xik weapon. The Norbie nodded that he understood and watched the riders round the lake, to be hidden by a series of mounds linked together by a brush wall.

'Nitra there"- last night. Maybeso not so now. Nitra do not wait like bug one sets foot upon! This evil thing – better we take it –'

'Not so,' Storm returned regretfully. 'Made only to be used by evil men – we touch – we killed!' He used the most emphatic of the death signs.

The rider with the tube appeared on the far side of the end mound. He dismounted, with none of the easy grace of a settler or the litheness of a Norbie, but in a scrambling way that informed Storm that to the alien the animal he had bestridden was merely a means of transportation and no more. Seeing that, the Terran could understand better how the Xiks had been able to cut down the frightened animals in the other valley undisturbed by the brutality of the act.

Having shouldered the tube, the invader climbed to the top of the mound and set about the business of putting together the rubble there to form a base for it. He moved expertly but with no hurry. Yet Storm did not miss that flash through the air, was able to pick out with the aid of the lenses the arrow, head down and still quivering, planted in the soil just a foot short of its target. But that must have been a specially lucky shot as no more arrows hit the mound.

The Nitra are shooting.' Storm passed the lenses again to Logan.

'Poor devils,' the other commented, 'they must be cornered –they wouldn't take such a chance unless they were.'

The other riders burst into sight, with the outlaws well to the fore, urging their mounts in a retreat that held panic as part of its haste.

'Drawing them on –' Storm speculated aloud. 'Those idiots are really planning to use that thing!'

He squirmed around on the bank of earth and stone, jabbing a fist at Gorgol's shoulder to urge him down. Another sweep of Storm's arm sent the blaster skidding to the cave floor ahead of him, as he took a grip on Logan's belt and jerked the younger man down with him. Surra? The cat was on the floor – Baku – Baku!

The eagle had gone foraging an hour ago. Storm beamed as best he could a message to keep up – up and safe in the high heavens.

'Get those horses back! All the way back into the tunnel mouth!'

'What's the matter? They set up that thing about a mile from here and facin' the other way –' Logan protested, but he was limping toward Rain, flapping his arms at the mares.

Together they forced the horses back into the mouth of the tunnel. Storm glanced back despairingly at that window on the outer world. But there was no time to close it.

'Get down!' He set the example, throwing himself flat on the floor, and saw Gorgol and Logan obey. 'Your eyes! Cover your eyes!' He shouted that to Logan, signed it to the Norbie. Then he lay waiting, his face buried in the crook of his arm.

The heartlessness of the aliens was never more plain than in this move. They would wipe out the pocket of Nitras right enough – but they would also doom most of the living things in this valley into the bargain. The Terran grinned without mirth as he remembered those outlaws riding for their lives. If he knew Xiks they would hardly delay long enough to give their colleagues a good start to safety. The chance for those riders to survive was so slender as to be practically nonexistent.

Surra had flattened herself beside Storm, and Hing was endeavouring to dig her way under him, scraping fruitlessly at the rock floor and whimpering, until he reached out an arm and gathered her in between him and the cat. He heard the horses stamp, but they did not venture out of the tunnel mouth where Logan had driven them. It was as if they were as alert to the warning in Storm's mind as the other animals.

He had nothing to guide him except those army reports. But those, using the terse language of such communications, had been circulated widely among all Commando outfits where the men or beast and man teams engaged in mopping-up activities might chance upon the new and horrific weapon. And service reports were not prone to exaggerate.

Why were the effects of the thing so much worse on non-Xiks? How long now before it would blow? Storm tried counting off seconds in the dark and was not aware he was doing it aloud until he heard a sound that could only be a chuckle coming from Logan's direction.

'I hope you're not makin' us pull this burrow trick for nothin',' the other remarked. 'How long before the world comes apart?'

His words might have been a cue. For their world, dark and stuffy as it was, did come apart then. Storm could never later describe what happened to him in that space of time lifted out of the ordinary stream of seconds, minutes, hours. The experience was like being caught up in a giant's hand, rolled into a conveniently sized ball, and tossed up in the air to be caught again. There was no thinking – no feeling – nothing but emptiness, with himself blown through it – on and on – and on –

And it was not wholly physical, that assault upon the stable foundations of his small portion of the planet. One part of Storm clung to the solid cave floor as an anchor for the part that whirled and flew. And inside he was torn because he so clung.

How long did it last? Was he unconscious toward the end of that weird struggle between substance and nonsubstance? Did the rocks about them keep them safe by turning the worst of the unknown radiation? He only knew that they did endure the backlash and lived.



Again he felt the warmth coming from Surra through the icy chill that blanketed the cave. He shrank from the scratching of King's claws as she squirmed and kicked.

For a long moment he lay still, as an insect might cower beneath a rock if it could foresee that in a moment that shelter would be lifted and it would be exposed to unforeseeable danger. Then, in the midst of his blinding, unreasoning panic, a spark of resolution sprouted. The Terran lifted his head from his arm and for a terrified minute thought he was blind. For there was no more small slit of sky – nothing but thick darkness – a chill darkness filled with the dead air native to this place.

Storm sat up, feeling Surra rise with him. She growled and spat. And then, out of the dark, Logan spoke with determined lightness:

'I think somebody just slammed the door!'

13

Storm used the torch, aiming it at the mouth of the cave. His mind refused to accept what his eyes reported – there was no longer any opening there. It had been closed once by the landslide – but that had been a different matter, an affair of earth and stone. This was a black ooze over that same earth and stone, a thick stuff in drips and runnels forming a complete curtain across.

'What in the –?'

The Terran heard Logan's amazed demand as he walked closer to that strange wall, focusing the torch on the widest of the black streaks. Storm could recognize the stuff now. It was the substance of that wedge rail the Survey party had trailed into the valley, the stuff that had walled the tunnel of the entrance gorge. Yet now it had been melted as tar might have softened and run from the breath of a blaster. Though he had not noticed it earlier, the building material of the long-ago aliens must have rimmed this cave, to be released by the backlash of the Xik weapon!

Storm handed the torch to Gorgol with a gesture to keep it trained on the widest of the surface streams. He rammied the stock of the blaster against that black runnel with all the strength he could put into a swinging blow. The light alloy of the butt gave off a metallic ring, rebounded with force enough to jar Storm back a step or two, yet the black stream showed no dent or mark.

The Terran reversed the weapon, set its dial to maximum and pressed the trigger. A point of vivid, eye-searing flame bored into the black stain for an instant, until Storm flicked the control. Again there was no impression on the alien coating.

'Nothing happened?' Logan limped around Gorgol to examine the wall for himself. 'What is that anyway?'

Storm explained almost absently. He had taken the torch back from Gorgol and was pacing along the front of the cave. Some trick of chance – or could it be that the ancient owners had prepared a booby trap for the unwary? – had cemented the barrier all the way across. Those black streams had run in just the places where they could best weld together rocks and earth. Perhaps Hing might be able to dig her way to freedom, but no effort could clear a large enough space to release the rest of them.

Which left – the tunnel.

Storm traversed the new wall for a second time, hoping against the evidence of his eyes to find some

break they could enlarge. He met Logan face to face as he turned back.

'I still don't see what happened – or why!' The Arzoran studied the wall beside him. 'If they had turned that little machine of theirs on us, yes. But the tube was facin' the other way – and a mile off at that!'

'The Confed Lab men after the first experiment said the results were a matter of vibration. And this stuff has been moulded like plasta-flesh. Must have turned every bit of it in this valley fluid for a time –'

'I hope,' Logan stood away from the wall, 'that it caught every one of those devils stickin' in it tight! No chance of breakin' through this?'

Storm shook his head. 'The blaster was our best hope. And you saw what happened when I tried that.'

'All right. Then we'll have to go explorin'. And I would suggest we move now. I don't know whether you've noticed it, but there's been a change in our air.'

That quality of staleness that Storm had met on his first imprisonment here was indeed very noticeable. And using the blaster had not helped to clear the atmosphere any. They would have to try the tunnel or face a very unpleasant death where they were.

Packing their supplies on the horses, with Surra padding in the lead beside Storm, they moved reluctantly into the tunnel. The Terran kept his torch on the lowest unit of its force. No use exhausting its charge when he had only one spare cartridge. And by its light they saw that they were out of the natural roughness of the cave into a cutting, which, if it had not been bored by intelligent beings, had been surfaced by them, for the walls changed abruptly from the red stone of the natural rock to the black of the alien material.

'Good thing your vibrations didn't reach this far,' Logan commented and then coughed. 'If this had been melted we would have been finished.'

Just as the period of the Xik attack had been lifted out of normal time for Storm, so did now this journey appear to take on the properties of a march through a nightmare. They must have been progressing at the rate of a normal walking pace, yet to the Terran the sensation of wading through some vast delaying flood persisted. Perhaps it was the inert quality of the air that affected his reactions, slowed his mind. Had it been minutes – or hours – since they had left the cave to enter this long tube where the flat black of walls, floor, roof sucked the air from a man's lungs and the light from the torch?

Then Surra left his side. She was a tawny streak in the torch light, leaping ahead, to be absorbed utterly by the gloom. He called after her and was nearly sent sprawling as Rain nudged against him. The horses were as eager as the cat to hurry ahead.

'Air!'

Storm caught that hint of breeze also. And it was more than just fresh air to battle the deadness of the passage; that puff of wind carried with it its own freshness and scents – strange perhaps, but pleasant. Storm stumbled on at a half-run, hearing the others pounding after him.

There was a turn in the corridor, the first they had found. Then light shone ahead, squares of light. Storm snapped off the torch and headed for that goal. He squeezed past Rain, urged one of the mares aside and nearly stumbled over Surra, who was standing on her hind legs, her paws resting on a crossbar of a grill-like closing, her head blotting out one of its squares.

Storm steadied himself with a grip on the bars, looked ahead.

But not into the open day as he thought he would. Instead he was surveying a section of what might be a garden. Yet there was not one of the plants sprawling there that he could name, not among those in the first bed, at any rate.

In the next – No! Storm's hands twisted tightly on the bar. He had been shaken when he had unrolled the package Na-Ta-Hay had sent him. But not as much as now. That small stretch of good clean green grass, the pine a little beyond – not a spizer, nor a candlestick gum, nor a Langful, but a true Terran pine!

'Pine!' He could make a song of that word, a song that would have power enough to pull the Faraway Gods across the void of space. His hands battered at the grill gate and then strove to find the release of its lock – let him through – out to stand beneath that pine!

'Storm – bar – other side –'

Somehow those words penetrated his excitement. There was a bar on the other side of the grid, the mechanism of its lock, as far as he could see through the holes, strange. But there was some way of opening it, there had to be!

The Terran worked his arm through one of the grill openings, pounded with his fist along the bar. His impatience built to a rage with the stubborn thing that kept them prisoners in the tunnel when all that fresh world lay beyond. Then his self-control began to assert itself once more. He withdrew his arm and unsheathed his belt knife.

Half-crouched, Storm flattened his body against the grill once more and picked with the knife point at every possible opening in and around that circle of metal that apparently locked the bar into place. Logan and Gorgol kept back the crowding animals while he worked. The sweat made his hand slippery, until at last he dropped the knife out of reach on the other side of the still-locked barrier. Gorgol's belt knife was too long and Logan's had been taken from him on his capture. There was no use in trying the blaster against the alien material of the portal.

Storm had gone back to the futile pounding when a sudden squeak from ground level – ground level on the opposite side of that obdurate door – startled him into sane thinking again. The squares of the grill might have kept out the rest of them, but Hing had squeezed through and was now watching him with expectancy.

Hing! Storm went down on his knees and schooled patience back into his voice as he chirruped to her. A Beast Master could only control and direct his charges when he was in full control of himself. He had forgotten the first rule of his training and the realization of that frightened him almost as much as the sight of the Xik weapon – more so because this fault lay within him, and it was the first time he had erred since his earliest days in the service.

The Terran forced himself to breathe more slowly and put aside his fear of not being able to master the alien lock. Hing was the important one now – Hing and her curiosity, her claws, the jobs she had been trained to do in the past. Storm blanked his mind, narrowed all his power of projection to one thing – and sent that thought along the path as he had called Baku out of the morning sky to help them clear the pass.

Hing sat up, her long clawed paws dangling in front of her lighter belly fur. Then she dropped to four feet once more, came to the door and climbed it agilely until she was perched on the bar itself, her pointed

nose only inches away from Storm's face. Again she waited and chirruped inquiringly.

He could not direct her, send those claws to the right places as he had in the past when she had destroyed buried installations, uncovered and rendered useless delicate machinery. Then the Terran had had models of the necessary kind to practise with, had been able to show Hing and her mate just what they must do. Now he did not even know the type of lock that baffled them. He could only use King's own curiosity as a tool, urge the meerkat to solve the mystery. And since she did not have the quick and reaching intelligence of Surra, nor the falcon brain of Baku, implanting the proper impulse was a longer process and a doubtful one.

Storm put all his force into that one beam of will. He did not know that he showed the face of a man strained close to the limit of endurance. And that the two who watched him, without understanding how or why he fought, were held silent by the strain and effort he displayed.

Hing walked a tightrope along the bar. Now she balanced on her hind feet, patting that circle of the lock with her paws. And if Storm did not actually hear the click of her investigating claws on the substance, he sensed them throughout his tense body as he poured out his will.

She raked the disc impatiently and shrilled a protest – perhaps at the stubborn lock, perhaps at his soundless command. But she did not retreat. Bending her head she tried her teeth on the thing, hissed almost as angrily as Surra had done, and went back to picking with her claws. Whether she did puzzle out the pattern, or whether it was only lucky chance, Storm was never to know. But there was a tiny flash of light. Hing squealed and leaped from the bar just as it dropped.

The grill swung open, dragging the Terran with it into the place of growing things. He was too weak from his efforts to get to his feet and was only barely conscious of Gorgol pulling him back out of the path of the horses. Then he was lying on his back, partially supported by the Norbie's arm, gazing up dazedly into a vast space filled with wisps of floating mist.

'What kind of a place –' Logan's voice sounded subdued, with more than a touch of awe.

The air was fresh, not only fresh but filled with scents – spicy, perfumed, provocative odours, as if someone had emptied all the aromatic growing things of a dozen worlds into one limited space and kept them at the peak of production.

And that was just what someone or something had done, as they discovered. Storm, with Gorgol to steady him, got to his feet. He saw Surra squatting on her haunches before a round puffball of a thing studded with cups of purple blooms, her eyes half-closed in ecstasy as she sniffed the delicate but tantalizing fragrance those flowers spread. And the horses had cantered on, stopping to graze on the bank of cool, green grass that had certainly once been rooted on the planet of Storm's birth.

He pulled loose from the Norbie's hold and staggered to the pine, his hands fondling its bark. The scent of the needles, or the resin, was stronger in his nostrils than the more exotic odours about him. It was true this was a pine, standing at the apex of a triangle of mixed Terran vegetation. And with the bole of the tree to steady him, Storm looked ahead, to see the brilliance of roses in full boom, tassels of lilacs, familiar, unfamiliar, all aflower, all scented, in an unbelievable mixed array.

'What is it?' Logan joined the Terran, his bruised face turned toward the mass of flowers and green as if he too felt some healing quality in it.

'From Earth!' Storm used the old word, sweeping his arms wide. These are all from my world! But how

did they come here?'

'And where and what is here?' Logan added. Those surely aren't Terran too –' His hand fell on Storm's arm and he drew the other part way around to face, across a narrow path of the alien black stuff, another mixed garden. And the Arzoran was very right. The oddly shaped – to Terran eyes – bushes with their bluish, twisted leaves, the striped flowers (if those flat plates were flowers) were not Terran – not from any world Storm knew.

Gorgol came across the open glade where the horses were. His fingers moved to express his own wonder –

'Many growing things – all different –'

Storm turned again, still putting one hand to the pine as an anchor, not only because of his tired body, but also because the wonder of its being here still made this all part of a strangely satisfying dream.

There were two more gardens or garden plots wedging out from the section directly before the gate grill, and each of them was widely different in the life it supported, save that odd and weird as the growing things appeared, they shared two attributes, none were truly ugly and all were sweet scented.

Logan rubbed his forehead with his bandaged hands and blinked.

There is something about all this –' He swung about slowly as Storm had done. A flight of brilliant patches that the Terran had thought firmly attached to a bush of ivory white stalks floated free, moved double wings, and skimmed to new perches. Birds? Insects? They could be either.

They have places on some worlds,' Logan pursued his own explanation, 'where they keep wild animals – call 'em zoos. It looks to me as if this place were meant to keep specimens of vegetation from a lot of different planets. One, two, three, four,' he counted the separate plots about them. 'And these are just about as different from each other as you can get.'

He was right, Storm could agree to that. Gorgol put out a hand and touched with gentle hesitation one of the ivory stems that had supported the flying flowers. He withdrew his fingers and sniffed at them with some of the same pleasure Surra had shown when she drank in the perfume of the purple cups.

Surra? Storm glanced around, seeking the cat. But she was gone, vanished somewhere into this scented wilderness. He sat down at the foot of the pine, leaning his back against its trunk, his hands flat against the earth that felt like home earth, moist, but firm under his flesh. He could close his eyes now to the riot of those other gardens and their weird beauty, or look up into the tent of green over him and be back again –

Gorgol and Logan drifted away. Storm was glad to be alone. Slowly he slid down the length of the pine bole until he was curled on a mat of needles and he slept, dreamlessly, completely relaxed, though the semblance of day about him never changed to evening.

'– biggest mixture you ever saw.' Logan lay on his back, sharing the bed under the pine, while Gorgol dug his fingers back and forth through the same needle padding, shifting the brown harvest of years. It was still day by the light, though they must have been many hours in the cavern.

'I'd say,' the Arzoran settler continued, 'that a whole mountain was hollowed out to hold this. We counted about sixty different gardens – including two which are mostly water. And then there are the fruit

orchards and vines –' He gestured at the remains of their recent meal, a small collection of pits and rinds. 'I tell you – this is fabulous!'

'No animal life –?'

'Birds, insects – no animals, except that cat of yours. We caught her rolling in a big patch of grey mossy stuff and acting as if she were wild. Ran away from us as if we were Xiks stalkin' her with one of those pop guns of theirs.'

'But how could all this keep growing without any attention for years, maybe centuries?' marvelled Storm. 'You are right, it is, it must have been intended as a botanical garden of specimens gathered from all over the galaxy. This' – he pulled a curl of flame-orange rind between his fingers – 'was an Astran "golden apple". And the black and white berries were from Sirius Three. But you'd think the place would have grown into a wilderness when it was left. Something continued to control it, kept the growth right, nourished everything properly –'

'Maybe the light is part of it,' Logan suggested. 'Or the atmosphere. I've noticed one thing.' He held out his hand. The bandages were gone and the wounds and burns Storm had tended were not only closed, they were almost healed.

'Show him your arm,' Logan signed to Gorgol and the Norbie presented his wounded forearm for inspection. The arrow tear was only a reddish mark, and the native used the limb freely with no sign of discomfort.

'How do you feel?' Logan demanded of Storm.

The Terran stretched. He had not really noticed before but, now that Logan had drawn the matter to his attention, he was aware that the weight of exhaustion that had ridden him into this Eden was gone. In fact Storm had not awakened so contented with life for a long time – for years. Like Surra he wanted to roll on the ground and purr his pleasure aloud.

'See?' Logan did not seem to expect an articulate answer.

'It's in the air here, all around us. Growth – making us feel alive and vigorous, healed of our hurts, too. Perhaps this place was designed for other uses besides just botanical display.'

'Does it also have a door out?'

'We found three doors,' Logan returned. 'Two are grills, but the third looks the most promising!'

'Why?'

'Because it has been walled up. The legends of the Sealed Caves suggest it might be an outlet to the outside –'

Storm supposed he should get up and go to inspect that doorway. But for the first time in years a kind of languorous laziness held him in its grip. Just to lie here under the pine, to watch Rain and the other horses at their ease, Logan and Gorgol beside him as relaxed as himself, none of them driven by a need for immediate action – it was wonderful, perfect! He and the others had found a small section of Paradise, why be in a hurry to leave it?

Gorgol sat up, brushed the pine needles from the fringes of his belt. He turned his head, gazing about him with a slow measurement and within Storm a faint, very faint apprehension awoke.

The native's yellow-red fingers moved in short sweeps, with pauses between, as if the importance of what he had to say was making the Norbie doubly careful of his choice of signs.

'This – trap – big trap.'

14

'Trap?' repeated Logan without much interest. But the languor that held Storm was pierced by a fast-growing doubt. Perhaps because he had known a variety of traps – and very ingenious ones – in the past, the Terran did not only listen but was receptive to such a warning.

'What manner of trap?' he signed.

'You like here – happy –' Gorgol was plainly groping for signs to convey a complicated idea. 'No go – want to stay –'

Storm sat up. 'You no want to stay?' he asked.

Gorgol looked about him again. 'Good –' He touched the remains of the fruit. 'Good!' He drew an exaggeratedly deep breath of the perfume-laden air. 'Feel good!' He gave an all embracing twirl of his fingers. 'But – not mine –' He ran those fingers through the pine needles. 'Not mine –' He flicked the fingers to include the other gardens about them. 'No Gorgol place here – not hold Gorgol –' Again he was trying to make limited signs explain more abstract thought. 'Your place – hold you –'

The Norbie had something! That alerting signal far inside Storm was clamouring more loudly. What better bait for a trap than a slice of a man's home planet served up just when he believed that world lost forever? Even if a trap were not intended, it was here just the same. He got to his feet, tramped determinedly away from the pine.

'Where's that built-up door of yours?' he demanded harshly over his shoulder, refusing to look back at that wedge of temptation set in familiar green.

'You think Gorgol's right?'

'You don't think about things such as that,' Storm answered out of the depths of experience, 'you feel! Maybe those who built this place didn't intend it for a trap –' He slapped Rain's flank, making the stallion move from the grass to the roadway that separated the small piece of Terra from its neighbour.

'Surraaaaa –' Storm shouted that aloud, an imperative summons that he had only had to use once or twice in their close comradeship. And his voice awoke echoes above and around the gardens, while birds flew and flower-coloured insects floated, disturbed, to settle again.

Leading Rain by the headstall, the Terran started down the path. The sooner he was away from that bit of his native earth the better. Already a new bitterness was beginning to fester in him and he turned it against the enemy outside. So the Xiks thought they had finished Terra? Perhaps – but they had not finished Terrans!

He hurried, deliberately twisting and turning from path to path, trying to muddle his own trail, so that he

could not easily find his way back to that pine-roofed spot. Twice more he called the dune cat. Hing pattered along behind him, stopping now and then to sniff inquisitively or dig, but perfectly willing to move, while the other horses followed Rain. They threaded the narrow roadways between gardens – such gardens. Twice Storm saw foliage he recognized, and both times they were samples from widely separated worlds.

'Left through here' – Logan came up beside him – 'around the end of this water place, then behind the one with the scarlet feather trees. I wonder what kind of a world those are from? See – now you're facing it.'

Storm followed his directions. The scarlet plumes of the trees arched high against the duller red of the stone wall of the mountain interior. And the black path led directly to an archway that had been carefully bricked up with blocks about a foot square. The Terran could see none of the black sealing material, unless it was used as mortar to set those bricks. Under his hands the wall was immovable, and he examined it carefully, wondering what tool there was among their supplies that could best be used to attack it.

Would the points of their belt knives make any impression on those cracks? He could turn on the blaster, but he was loathe to use up the charge in the most potent weapon they had. Best try knives first.

At the end of a quarter of an hour, his hands slippery with sweat, his control over his temper hard pressed, Storm admitted that knives were not the answer. That left the blaster. It was not a disrupter, of course. But set to highest power it should act upon the blocks, if not upon the stuff that held them together.

Sending the rest of the party back, Storm lay on the path, resting the barrel of the Xik weapon on several stones so that its sights were aligned with a point in the middle of the wall, directly below the highest rise of the arch. He pressed the release button and fought the answering kick of the weapon, holding it steady as Xik-made lightning struck full on the blocks.

For seconds, perhaps a full minute, there was a flareback that beat at Storm with a wave of blast heat. Then a core of yellow showed at the centre point of the beam, the yellow spreading outward in a circle. The colour deepened. Harsh fumes spreading from that contact point made Storm cough, his eyes stream. But he held the blaster steady for another long moment before he started to depress the barrel slowly, drawing the yellow mark down in a line toward the floor.

As the light began to pulse, he knew that the charge was nearing exhaustion. What if he had guessed wrong and thrown away the blaster without achieving their freedom? Storm held the weapon tensely while those pulsations grew more ragged, until the pressure of his finger on the firing button brought no response.

To his vast disappointment the wall, save for that heat scar, looked as staunch as it had been on his first examination. He could not wait to know the truth. Reversing the blaster so its stock was a club, he ran forward in spite of the lingering heat, to thrust the butt into the scar with all the force of his weight and strength behind it.

There was a shock that made the Terran grunt as the metal stock met the blocks. But it wasn't the blaster that gave. A whole section where the flame had licked moved outward – perhaps not very much. But he had felt it give. Heartened he struck again. The section of blocks broke apart, not along the joints where they had been mortared together, but in the middle of the stone squares themselves – proving once again that the building material of the unknown aliens was more enduring than the products of nature.



Before he attacked the second time Storm allowed the wall to cool. The fumes of the ray were gone, almost as if they had been sucked away or absorbed by some quality in the air of the garden cavern. A bush with a lacy covering quivered until its iridescent leaves shook, and Surra, her fur ruffled, her eyes glinting wild and feral, crawled from under it to the roadway and stood panting before Storm.

He rubbed behind her ears, along the line of her pointed fox jaw, talking to her in that crooning speech that soothed her best. She was excited, over stimulated, and he marvelled that she had answered his call. One could never be sure with the felines, their independence kept them from being servants – companions, yes, and war comrades, but not servants to man. Each time Surra obeyed some order or summons Storm knew that obedience was by her will and not his. And he could never be sure whether his hold on her would continue. Now, under his gentling, she softened, purred, dabbing at his hands with a claw-sheathed paw. The alien trap had not taken Surra either.

They plundered the fruit gardens for another meal, filled their canteens with purified water from a miniature waterfall in one of the lake lands and waited. Until, at last, with the three of them working, they were able to handle the cooled blocks and break their way through the barrier.

Logan had been right in his surmise. No tunnel reached before them, only the mouth of another cave, and, beyond that, the light of Arzoran day. They led the horses one by one through that break, and Gorgol, who had gone out on a short scout, returned, his hands flashing in an excited message.

This place I know! Here I slew the evil flyer when I went on my man hunt. There is a trail from this place \_'

They came out in a valley so narrow that it was merely a ravine between two towering heights. And the cut was so barren of vegetation that the sun trapped within those walls made a glaring furnace of the depths, so that the contrast between this sere outer world and the delights of the cavern was even more pronounced. On impulse Storm turned back to rebuild the barrier they had broken through, piling the crumbling blocks of stone across the opening. Logan joined in, his healing lips no longer so puffed that they could not shape a smile.

'Let the sealed ones continue to keep their secrets, eh?' He laughed. This is too good a hiding hole to waste. We may have need of it again.'

But how quickly that need was to come they did not dream. Gorgol mounted one of the mares and turned her to the southern end of the valley. Logan swung up bareback on a second horse, they having packed what was left of their supplies on the yearling. Storm was just about to settle himself on Rain's pad saddle when Surra gave her battle cry, bounding ahead of the Norbie's horse, to face the end of the valley, the hair along her backbone roughed, her ears flattened to her skull as she hissed defiance.

Her hiss was answered twofold. Gorgol's stun rod went up as a yellow-grey boulder detached itself from the general mass of rocks before them, produced driving feet, and charged in an insane rage before Storm understood what was happening.

The yoris, meeting the beam of the stun ray head on, gave a choked scream and landed in a skidding heap while Gorgol fought his terrorized horse. The mare Logan was riding panicked, and her rider, still suffering from his beating, with no reins or saddle as an anchor, was thrown, rolling over just as a second yoris came out of a pocket in the cliff and screeched down to join its mate.

Storm's arrow hit a lucky mark, the soft underskin of the lizard's throat, one of the giant reptile's three

vulnerable spots. But the thing was not killed outright. Snapping its murderous jaws, it beat against the ground, and Logan threw himself back with a cry, a red stream welling through his boot over the calf. Gorgol beamed the wounded lizard and it went limp. But the Norbie paid no heed to the yoris as he vaulted to Logan's side.

Young Quade had both hands clasped tightly about his leg just above that wound, his face very pale. He glanced up at Storm with an odd emptiness in the brilliant blue of his eyes.

Gorgol drew his knife and cut a length of fringe from his belt. He worked the boot from Logan's leg with a quick jerk that made the other catch his breath. With the cord of fringe he looped a tourniquet above the wound and then passed the ends to Storm to twist tight while he went to the yoris, prying open its mouth to peer within. That examination required only a second. The native stooped to slash at the middle of the lizard, ripping out a great hunk of fatty flesh. He ran back to clap it over the bloody gash on Logan's leg.

'Male' – Logan got the word out between set teeth – 'poison –'

Storm was cold inside. There was nothing in his depleted aid kit that could handle this. And he had heard tales of yoris poison, most of them grisly. But Gorgol was signing.

'Draw poison out –' He gestured to the raw gob of lizard fat. 'No ride, no walk – be quiet – sick, very sick soon –'

Logan shaped a shadow of a smile. 'He's not just fanning his fingers when he says that.' His voice sounded oddly thick. 'I think I've had it, fella –'

The pallor that crept up under his brown skin was close to grey and his hands and arms jerked in spasmodic quivers that he apparently could not control. A small trickle of blood rilled from the corner of his swollen mouth.

Gorgol went back to the yoris and cut a fresh strip of fat. He motioned to Storm to pull off the first poultice and slapped on the second. With the blood on the discarded lump there was a blue discolouration. The Norbie pointed to it.

'Poison – it comes –'

But could they hope to draw out all the venom that way, wondered Storm. Logan no longer twitched. His head had slumped forward on his chest and he was breathing in quick snorts, his ribs showing under the tight skin as the lungs beneath them laboured. His skin was clammy to the touch, with cold perspiration rising in great beads. Storm thought that he was no longer conscious.

Four more times Gorgol changed that poultice of lizard flesh. The last time it came away without a trace of the blue stain. But Logan lay inert, his breathing very quick and shallow.

'No more poison. Now he sleep –' the Norbie explained.

'Will he wake?'

Gorgol studied the unconscious rider. 'Maybeso. No thing else to do. No ride, no walk, maybeso this many days –' He held up two fingers.

'Look here,' Storm began aloud and then switched to signs. 'You tell me how go – I find help – come back – you wait for me in place of growing things –'

The Norbie nodded. 'I keep watch – you bring help – tell also about evil ones –'

Together they carried Logan back into the cavern and then Storm proceeded to strip down for a quick journey along the trail Gorgol drew in the dust for him to memorize. He would take Rain but not Surra. Perhaps he would find Baku outside. But he intended to set and keep a pace the cat could not match.

At the last, he took only two of the canteens, a packet of iron rations, and his bow and arrows. Gorgol offered him back the stun rod and he hesitated, refusing it only because he knew the symbolic reliance the Norbie placed upon it. That, and the thought that the Xiks might just invade the valley outside and he had to leave Gorgol the best defence.

Logan was still limp and unresponding when Storm examined him before he left. But the Terran was sure that the other's breathing was better, that his stupor was now close to normal sleep. If he did nothing in the way of exercise to send the remaining poison through his system, he had a good chance for recovery. And all settlers possessed yoris antidote, which Storm could bring back with him.

So, in the hours of the next dawn, the Terran set out, passing the scavenger-stripped bones of the yoris, heading along that trail Gorgol had committed to memory two seasons earlier.

As Storm rode he beamed a silent call for Baku. But, as there came no answering dive from the skies, no rasping scream of greeting, he began to fear that the eagle had not escaped the backlash of the Xik weapon. He missed Surra's scouting, the aid of her keen scent and keener hearing, and he began to realize that he might have come to depend too heavily upon his team.

The path Gorgol had discovered leading out of this slice of valley was a defile that curved around southwest, and should, the Norbie had promised, bring him out of the mountains proper by sundown. Nowhere did Storm find any trace of either Nitra or Xik, though twice he crossed a fairly fresh yoris trail and once marked claw prints in a bank of soft earth that might have been the sign left by the monster of the heights Gorgol called the evil flyer.

He camped that night in a small side gully, a dry camp where he shared with Rain the contents of one of his canteens, and the stallion grazed disdainfully on some bunches of coarse grass already browning to summer death. But the morning came cool and cloudy and Storm pushed the pace, wanting to be out of these gorges if another cloudburst was brewing aloft, his lively imagination painting a vivid picture of what a sudden dash of water down these ways would mean to a trapped horse and its rider.

By midmorning the threatening clouds had not yet released their burden of water, and the Terran was cantering into the fringe of lowland that extended a tongue to the very foot of the Peaks. According to Logan, he should come across the first of the line cabins before nightfall and find within the communicator that would link him to all the range holdings of the district.

But Storm chanced upon the village first. The Staffa had cut a path across this level country and the Terran detoured to follow its west bank, sure that what he sought could not have been located too far from the necessary water. The rounded tent domes of a Norbie camp were a very welcome sight. He reined in, slung his bow so that he could show empty hands for the sentry, and waited. Only no sentry appeared to challenge him, and now, when he let Rain trot closer, Storm could sight no warriors about those tents. The continued eerie silence finally made him halt once more.

Norbie villages were never permanent affairs. You could come across the signs of old camp sites along any river in the right district. But neither was it customary for any clan to ride off and leave their curved roof poles standing, the hide and skin coverings stretched in place. Both possessions counted as part of the families' wealth and were too hard to replace.

By the crimson strings marking the shield pole of the largest tent this was a Shosonna clan, allied to Gorgol's people and friendly to the settlers. Had it suffered a Nitra raid? Storm kept Rain down to a walk and proceeded cautiously toward the tents. More Xik devilry?

'All right, rider! Stand where you are and keep your hands open!'

That voice came out of the blue – or rather lavender sky – as far as Storm could determine. But the bite in the tone was enough to lead the Terran to obey orders – for that moment anyway. He held up his hands, palm out, searching sky and ground for the invisible challenger.

'We've a far sighter on you, fella –'

So! Storm's pride in his scout's art revived a little. A far sighter could pick up a man a mile or more away. The unknown speaker could have cut him down before he even knew the other was in the country. But who was that unknown? Outlaws talking for the Xiks? Settlers? One guess was as good as another.

Rain snorted, stamped, and half turned his head toward his rider as if to ask what they were waiting for. Storm still watched the lodges before him, the waving grass of the plain, the banks of the stream, searching for some sign of the men he was sure were hidden there. His own impatience approached the boiling point. This was no time to play games of hide-and-seek. The sooner Logan had medical attention the better. And the knowledge of the Xik holdouts must be relayed to the authorities at once.

At last he deliberately dropped his hands. And that might have been an awaited signal, for three men stepped out of the chieftain's tent in the village and began to walk toward him, their stun rods centred steadily on him.

'Dumaroy!' he said under his breath, 'and Bister!' That was a combination he did not relish.

Coll Bister had fallen a step or so behind his companions and Storm, giving him his main attention, was sure the other had recognized him. A moment later he had oral proof of that.

'It's that crazy Terran I told you about!' Bister must be purposely raising his voice it carried so well. 'Run with the goats all the way down the trail to the Crossin'. Clean off his head, he is. And it looks like he's teamed up with the horned boys for good.'

Dumaroy strode ponderously on, an impressive figure physically, and as dangerous in his own way as a fawn bull. Storm knew his type. If the settler had already made up his mind, nothing could change his point of view.

'Why the holdup, Dumaroy?' the Terran asked mildly, in his most gentle voice. 'I'm glad to meet you. Back in the Peaks –'

Once before Storm had been a target for a stun rod and had suffered the consequences. But then he had not taken the beam dead centre. This was worse than any blow, almost as bad as the wild tumult he had ridden out in the backlash of the Xik projector. He did not realize that he had fallen from the saddle pad

until he was lying dazed on the ground, the sky swirling madly over him and a faint shouting making a clamour in his ears.

He felt hands turn him over roughly, secure his wrists, taking him prisoner as he tumbled into a dark pit of unconsciousness. His last weak thought was that one of the three had shot him without warning. And Bister's broad face was in the picture. Only there was something wrong with that face – something wrong with Bister – and it was important that Storm understand that wrongness, very important to him.

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The torturing headache that was the result of being stunned provided a fierce rhythm over and under Storm's eyes. And his eyes hurt in the bargain when he forced them open. But a feeling of urgency carried over from the past and the Terran fought for control over mind and body. His tentative struggles informed him that he had been staked out on the ground and that every pull he gave to his bonds heightened the pounding in his head.

The time was early evening, Storm judged, as he squinted at the daylight between half-closed lids, and he could hear the coming and going, the inconsequential talk of riders in camp around him. In spite of his sick dizziness the Terran concentrated on picking up what information he could from their conversations.

Piece by piece, half-heard sentences built an ugly picture indeed. Some of what Logan had feared had already come to pass. Dumaroy's main herd had been raided and the trail of the stolen beasts led straight to the Shosonna river bank camp, which the aroused riders had attacked in retaliation. Luckily the Norbies had fled in time and there had been no killing, though when the riders pursued them, two men had been badly wounded by arrows.

Dumaroy was now awaiting reinforcements, determined to track down the Shosonna back in the hills and teach them a drastic lesson. He had sent out a call to rally all able-bodied settlers as there were signs that the retreating Shosonna band had crossed fresh Nitra trails and the original posse feared a uniting of the two native clans against the settlers' expedition.

Let there once be a real battle between Norbie and settler and Xik plans would be well on the way to complete realization. The holdout outlaws could continue to needle both sides without loss of either secrecy or any of their own numbers. That is, it might have worked that way had not Storm reached the settlers. But surely once he had a chance to tell his story Dumaroy would have to reconsider, to wait for the Peace Officers. Bister – somehow Coll Bister had an important part. Storm was as certain, as if he had seen him do it, that Bister had rayed him before he could give his information. What sort of a tale had the other concocted while the Terran lay unconscious to explain that raying without warning, to supply a valid reason for keeping the other prisoner?

That Storm was friendly toward the natives was not strong enough. Too many of the settlers felt the same way. As a Terran he could be suspected of mental instability – had Bister played that angle? It was a hard one to refute. Everyone had heard the rumours out of the Centre and Bister had travelled with him from the Port to the Crossing – Nobody here he could appeal to –

Since the Terran could not raise his head more than an inch or so his range of vision was necessarily quite limited and those men he sighted were all strangers. Dort Lancin had a range in the Peak area, and if the settlers came in at the summons to back Dumaroy, he should arrive sooner or later. Dort Lancin was a staunch supporter of the pro-Norbie party and he could speak for Storm. But the Terran fumed inwardly over the waste of time.

Bister – that was Bister approaching now. On impulse Storm closed his eyes. A sharp tug on the rope about his ankles sent a quiver of pure agony through his head and he had difficulty in remaining still. Then followed a similar jerk at the wrists extended above his head. Scuff of boots on the ground – a grunt. Storm dared to peek. Bister was standing, his attention distracted by the sound of galloping horses.

Storm watched the settler as one fighting man measures another – an enemy – during a momentary truce. The fellow was a puzzle. He nourished hatred for Storm, had disliked the Terran from the first, for no reason Storm could fathom. If Bister were true to type, he would have been only too eager to mix it up physically. Yet Storm had mastered him without difficulty at their first embroilment and thereafter Bister had tried to get others to do his fighting for him – almost as if his impressive body, his cover of trail bully, was only the outer husk of a very different personality.

A suspicion, wild and unfounded, crossed Storm's muzzy mind as he groggily pursued that line of reasoning. Perhaps it was well that the party of horsemen whirled by just then to distract his captor for the Terran gasped. There were those stories Storm had heard in the last weeks of the war when the desperate enemy had emptied out their full bag of tricks and weapons, stories he had heard in greater detail later during the dreary months at the Centre when men had sweated out rehabilitation. An aper!

If Bister were one of these fabulous apers – an Xik reconstructed by surgery and every available form of psycho-training to pass as a Confed man – that would explain a lot. He would in fact be the most dangerous 'man' Storm had ever faced. For by all accounts an aper gathered under one changed skin as many – or more – varied talents as a Commando Beast Master, and was trained to use every one of his weird gifts.

But those tales had been dismissed as the wildest of barracks rumours. Storm had heard them repeatedly denied, been assured by psycho-medics and intelligence men that such a thing was virtually impossible. Of course, those authorities had hedged with the 'virtually'.

As if this thought were not startling enough, Storm discovered another frightening thing. Bister had not been just inspecting the captive's bonds a moment ago, he had been loosening them! Bister wanted the Terran free, only Storm was also sure that Bister wanted him dead. The fellow had not dared to betray himself by using any weapon more lethal than a stun rod at their encounter at the Shosonna village. But it would be very easy to knife or otherwise fatally dispose of an escaping prisoner.

So – here was one prisoner who would not escape, even when encouraged. Storm was so lost in that line of reasoning that he was not at first aware of the loud argument not too far away, not until he heard one name mentioned that drove the problem of Bister momentarily to the back of his mind.

‘– Brad Quade, and he's breathin' out rocket fumes all the way up river! You'd better take it easy, Dumaroy – he's got a Peace Officer with him and if you go off half set and start a Norbie dust-up you'll have to answer to Galwadi for it! I'm not goin' to head into those hills 'till Quade gets here –'

'You can lick dust off Brad Quade's boots if you want to, Jaffe. No man here's goin' to stop you. Only we aren't goin' to have the Basin tell us here at the Peaks not to protect our own property and go along nursin' these thievin' goats! Every one of you saw that trail. It led right to that village and then off again into the mountains. Me, I've lost my last herd to the goats! And I'll tell that flat to any Peace Officer. As for Brad Quade – if he knows what's good for him, he'll keep his nose out of our affairs. So that kid of his is missin'? Well, I'll lay you five credits right on the line that Logan's been ambushed by goats and his right hand's curin' right now in some Nitra Thunder House! I'm sayin' right now that we're ridin' on come sunup. And anybody here who don't want to do that can clear out now –'

There was a muttering and a few raised voices. Storm, straining to listen, gathered that Dumaroy's private army was not so keen on Norbie chasing as their leader wished.

'All right! All right!' The settler's bull roar deadened the other's clamour once more. 'You can just get your horses, all of you, and clear out of here. You, Jaffe, an' Hyke, and Palasco – Only don't you come whinin' to me when you're cleaned out, and there're goat tracks all over your ranges. You just go and talky-talk it out with Brad Quade and let him point his fingers at the goats to give 'em back!'

'And I'm tellin' you back, Dumaroy, that you'll pull the Peaks into a big mess and we'll all be in trouble. You better wait and hear what Quade and the Peace Officer have to say. They'll be here in the mornin' –'

'Get out!' The roar was a red-edged bellow. 'Get outta here, you soft riders! I'm not takin' orders from Quade. He may be the big chief back at the Basin, but not here. Clear out – every last one of you!'

Storm was tempted. Should he make a break for it along with the rebel party? He tried to raise his head and was answered by such a thrust of pain as blurred his sight for an instant. There was no hope of his moving quickly enough to elude Bister until more of the ray effects had worn off. But the thought that Quade was moving up river gave him a little hope. No matter what lay between them personally, the Terran had more confidence in the settler than he wanted to admit. And he was sure that Quade, alone of the settlers he had met so far on Arzor, had the force of character and leadership to stand up to the Xik-fostered mess now brewing. Storm must make the escape Bister had set up for him, but make it a successful attempt, one which would carry him and his information into Brad Quade's camp.

Luckily in the general confusion Dumaroy seemed to have forgotten his prisoner. At least no one came to inspect Storm for signs of life, or prepared to ask questions. That too might have been the result of planning on Bister's part. It was odd, Storm thought, but since that first suspicion of the other's true identity had dawned on him, he had accepted it as a fact. Though he was just as sure if he shouted aloud his belief in this camp he would only prove to the Arzorans that he was indeed one of the crazed Terrans – just another refugee who had finally been pushed over the verge of sanity.

Storm began to fight as well as he could the hang-over of the stun ray, taking care to attract no attention. It was slightly in his favour that he had been staked out on one side of a small hillock that rose between him and the centre of the camp. Save for men going to the river for water and a few others spreading out their bedrolls, he was not generally under observation.

At first it was a fight to move his head. He did not dare to draw his hands away from the stakes where they had been pinioned lest somewhere out of his line of sight Bister was waiting for just such a move. But when Storm was able to lift his head without suffering too much pain, he saw that dusk was closing in. Just let night come and he would be willing to risk Bister, though the other had all the advantages on his side.

But before dark Dumaroy at last remembered his prisoner. Storm shut his eyes, counterfeited as best he could the rigid tension of a stun-shocked man.

'He's been under long enough –' Dumaroy was not exactly uneasy but he sounded puzzled. Bister answered and Storm listened for the slightest hint of accent in his voice that might help to unmask the aper.

'He's a Terran. They can't stand up to a ray – don't use 'em much –'

'Maybe. But Starle tells me this fella was a Commando –they're supposed to be a tough crowd. I don't

see why you thought you had to ray him out anyway, Coll.'

'I came down the trail from the Port with him. He's tricky –and he was half over the edge then – like all Terrans. You've heard the stories about how they blew up after they heard about Terra being given the big burn. This fella got it in his head that everybody was against him – plottin' to get him. Everyone except the goats. He got chummy with them right from the start. When he disappeared so quick from the Crossin', I nosed around a little. He's a Beast-Master. You should have seen him gentlin' a string for Put Larkin. Let a fella who can do what he can with animals get in as a Butcher and with the goats lettin' him set up in their territory – and you've got yourself a live yoris by the hind foot! Wouldn't surprise me none to find out he was back of this Shosonna raid. I didn't want him to get away out there before we had a chance to ask some questions. Might be well to put him undercover or you'll have to hand him over to the Peace Officer –'

'He can't ride until he comes to.' Dumaroy commented. 'Keep an eye on him, Coll, and let me know when he wakes up. Yes, I want to ask him a few questions –'

They moved off while Storm held his body rigid until the ache in his sorely tried muscles came close to matching the ache in his heavy head. So Coll Bister was to keep an eye on him? That would give Bister opportunity to get rid of one Hosteen Storm with as little fuss as possible. If he only had Surra waiting out there in the grass – or Baku – Then Storm took hold of himself firmly, surely he was not so lacking in resources that he had to depend only upon his animals!

The gurgle of the river made a steady sound, backing all the noises of the camp. In this country rivers were necessary. Quade and his party were undoubtedly camped on one bank or the other of this same stream. Storm did not know whether he could muster the strength to sit a horse – even Rain. Could he trust himself to the water instead?

All riders habitually strapped a canteen to their saddles or saddle pads when on the range. But a camp as large as this one, with the men planning to head into the drier mountains, would have in addition other preparations for the transportation of water. And a common one here, Storm knew, was water-toad hide bags that could be slung in pairs across the backs of pack animals.

Such bags were large oval affairs, each made from the entire skin of one of the huge amphibians found in the marshes, tanned and cured for use by the fisher-Norbies of the southern coasts. Almost transparent, the skins inflated like balloons when moistened as they were before being filled. Storm had seen Norbie children make rafts of them at Krotag's camp. With a pair of those to buoy him up, a man's swimming ability would be no great problem; he could float along with the current.

There remained the point of his break out of camp past Bister's sentry-go, and the stealing of one, maybe two water bags. If the posse was going to start out on the Shosonna trail in the early morning, Dumaroy would send one of his riders down to the river to refill those bags. They had to stand through the night hours with the purifying tablets in them or their contents would not be drinkable for half the next day. It was a procedure Storm had followed himself when with the Survey party.

Weakened as he was, Storm believed he could handle one rider, especially if he took the man by surprise. But Bister – Bister remained the big threat. All depended upon chance and his own ability to seize the first possible opening.

He slowly flexed his fingers and wrists, feeling his bonds give. What was left him for a weapon? Only the fact that his enemy – though he might look human, be drilled to think and act human – was not born of the same species. How could Coll Bister, the aper, ever be sure from one moment to the next that he



would not make some small slip that would damn him utterly for what he was? Perhaps his hatred for Storm was based on that fear, for Bister could recognize in the Beast Master one who had been selected for that service because of just such off-beat qualities of mind – though probably not the same ones – as those he himself possessed. So Bister might have built up his distrust of the Terran until at present he credited Storm with far higher gifts of perception and extrasensory powers than any living man could hope for. Bister, in his present state of mind, could not be sure how Storm would react to anything – even a ray beam. Now the Terran must turn that gnawing uncertainty of his enemy to his own account in the opening move of their private struggle.

Storm waited until he was rewarded by what he had hoped to see, one of Dumaroy's men passing on the way to the river, empty water skins flapping on his shoulders. He allowed him to pass and then staged his act.

With a low moan the Terran twisted, apparently fighting his bonds. The man turned, gaped at him, and came over. Luck was on Storm's side so far; he had not fallen afoul of a quickwitted man. Another moan, low, and as realistic as he could make it – he was a little surprised at his own artistic ability – and the man, dropping his burden, went down on one knee to inspect the captive more closely.

Storm's arm swept up to strike at the side of the other's neck. The blow did not land quite true, he was too weak to deliver it correctly, but it brought the rider off balance and down on top of the Terran. Then the right pressure applied and the fellow, still surprised, went limp. For a long moment of perilous waiting Storm held the flaccid body to him, waiting for the shout, the running feet, and also to gather strength for his next move.

When there was no reaction from the camp, the Terran cautiously rolled out from under the rider and stretched the man in his place. Sweeping up the water skins, he forced himself to walk at an even pace to the river bank. Three – maybe four more yards and he would make it. Then to inflate the water bags – and not to force the air out of them again. He need only secure the mouth of each skin with its dangling cord and he had his improvised raft.

However, the river was a popular place at present. A noisy party was bathing and there were horses being brought down to drink. Storm, the bags crumpled tight in one arm, took to cover, working his way through a reed bank, expecting every moment to have the cry of alarm raised behind him.

What did happen was that he caught sight of Rain among the horses being watered. The stallion was not taking kindly to this shepherding and he was plainly in an ugly mood. A black horse squealed and offered challenge and the red-spotted mount was only too ready to oblige. The rider in charge pushed his own animal forward and used his quirt freely for discipline.

But with Rain that was a very wrong move. The stallion, who had never been touched by a whip since Storm had brought him out of Larkin's corral at the space port, went completely fighting mad. And Rain, though young, was a formidable opponent, as he let loose with both hoofs and teeth.

Storm slipped to the water's edge. The attention of all the men along the stream was on the plunging, screaming horses. He saw Rain dash into mainstream as he himself plunged into the current, the inflated bags ready as a buoy when he needed them. The river, which appeared so lazy from the bank, was provided with a swifter core and Storm struck out into it.

He heard more shouting, saw the red and grey horse break from the water and race, at a speed the Terran was sure few if any of the mounts in the camp could match, through the riders in the general direction of the mountains and freedom. Then the river curved and Storm was carried out of sight.

The excitement of escape gave him the energy to reach the main current, but once in its grip the Terran did little except cling to the puffed skins and hope that Quade's camp was not too far away. Night came and Storm, his head and shoulders supported above the level of the water, shivered under the touch of a mountain-born wind. There was a flick of lightning over those heights, the distant rumble of thunder as a threat. He would have to watch the water about him, be ready to make for the shore before the wash of a flood added to the current.

But it was hard to think clearly and his whole body trailed soddenly behind the bobbing skins. Storm could not judge the passing of time. The thought that he had beat Bister was for the moment a small triumph, quickly dulled.

There were no moons visible in the sky and the stars showed dim and far away between ragged patches of wind-driven clouds. Storm, his cheek pillowed on the clammy skins, was only half aware that he was still waterborne southward. He was nosed by an investigating water rat. But perhaps the scent of his off-world body made the big rodent wary, for the creature only swam beside him for a space.

However, the coming of the rat aroused Storm to make some efforts on his own for the streams of Arzor had larger and more dangerous inhabitants than water rats. And some of them might be less fastidious. He began to kick his legs, attempting not only to quicken his rate of travel, but to steer the odd raft.

Sometime in the dark hours the Terran ran into difficulty. The river made another turn and here drift had built a tongue of tangled flotsam out into the water. Before Storm was conscious of danger a snag pierced one skin and its sudden deflation into tatters plunged him under water, bringing him up with cruel force against the wall of drift.

Somehow he pulled himself up that barrier, fought his way over it at the price of scratches and gouges, until he was able to reach sand and finally meadow turf beyond. He sprawled there face down, too spent to struggle, and went to sleep.

'— bring him around now —'

'It's that Terran, Storm! But what —?'

'Been in the river by the looks of him.'

There was light now, the warmth of fire combined with the clearer gleam of a camp atom-light. There was an arm under his shoulders, holding his head up so that he could swallow from a cup pressed against his lips. There was a strange dreamlike haze over the scene, but one face swam out of that haze, took on reality, perhaps because those features had had a place in so many of his dreams. And this time Storm was able to talk to the man he had come to Arzor to — to kill. Yes, he had come across space to kill Brad Quade! Yet that desire seemed now as remote as a year-old battle in a jungle wilderness, three solar systems away!

'Trouble —' He got that out and the word was such a limited expression of what he must say. 'Xik holdouts in the Peaks —Norbies — Dumaroy — Logan —'

He was being shaken, first gently, and then with rougher insistence.

'Where is Logan?'

And Storm, caught again in the mazes of his dream, answered with some of his own longing:

'Terra – garden of Terra.'

16

When he made better sense later, Storm discovered that the party who had followed Brad Quade into the Peak Ranges did not ride with closed minds. Kelson, of the Planetary Peace Police, a big, slow-speaking man with eyes that Storm decided overlooked nothing, and with a computer bank for a mind, asked a few questions, every one directly to the point.

The Terran had been reluctant to voice his suspicions concerning Bister. Such a story might be accepted by veterans of his own corps who had good reason for knowing that agents could assume a wide variety of cover. But to ask these men who had never come up personally against the Xiks at all to accept the fact that one had been living among them undetected, and without any more proof than Storm was able to offer, was another matter.

To his vast surprise when Kelson drew from him that revelation – with the questions of a well-trained inquisitor as the Terran understood too late – none of his listeners displayed incredulity. Maybe these planet bound settlers were more open to such imaginative flights – as the existence of an aper among them – than were the service officers trained to meet the nonproven with wary disbelief.

'Bister –' Quade repeated thoughtfully. 'Coll Bister. Anybody here know him?'

Dort Lancin answered first. 'He rode down from the port as trail herder, 'long with me and Storm. Just like the kid here tells it. Seemed just like any other drifter to me. Only I heard about apers when I was with the outfit. Seems like they captured two of them close to the end, wearing Confed uniforms and runnin' a side show to the big muddle. Might have fouled up that whole sector if one of the messes they cooked up hadn't been called to the attention of a section commander in time. After that mix-up a lot of the boys looked close at each other, providin' they weren't born and raised together in the same river valley or such! Bister didn't come in on our ship, and he was a new light and tie with Larkin, never rode for Put before. Don't know where he came from – except Put picked him as a hire rider along with the rest of us.'

'Guilt,' Kelson observed, 'is a queer thing. Bister hated Terrans, and he was probably, as you say, afraid of you, Storm, because you were trained for a duty not unlike his own. If he hadn't been guilty – and afraid – he wouldn't have tipped his hand by his treatment of you. Bister is one man we are going to rope tomorrow – or rather today – and tight! If Dumaroy's moved out, we'll trail him. But we don't want to tangle with the Xiks. Since they are provided with the type of weapons you report, Storm, we'll need a Patrol ship in here to really mop up. Quade, you'll want to collect your kid anyway – you strike in that direction, angle up with a scout party to the east. I'll ride on with the rest of you and try to head Dumaroy off. I think we can learn a lot more by splitting –'

So they did as Kelson suggested. Quade, with Storm as a guide, and two of the settler's riders, took the side trail after they found Dumaroy's river bank camp deserted and indications that the Peaks settler had proceeded with his plan to trace the Norbies and his missing herd into the mountains.

Storm rode in a dreamy haze. He located his landmarks, made his calculations as to where they must avoid possible ambush. But all of that was handled mechanically by a part of him operating as a robot set to a well-defined task and keeping to the pattern of a work tape. Whether the stun ray had more lasting effects than he had supposed, the Terran could not tell. But nothing about him appeared to have much

meaning. He rode beside Quade for a space and answered questions concerning his meeting with Logan, their escape from the Xiks and through the cave of the gardens, and the final disastrous attack of the yoris. Yet to the Terran the conversation was all a part of a dream. Nor was he conscious when Quade began to study him covertly as they bored farther into the wild territory of the foothills.

However much that haziness clouded his mind, it did not prevent an instant reaction to trouble when attack did come. They were in the narrow opening of that gorge leading to the valley of Gorgol's cave entrance, riding single file as the ground demanded. Storm had perhaps five seconds of time to sound the alert. He saw that yellow-red arm move, the blue streaks of painted horns against a domed skull.

'Ahuuuuuuu!' The war cry of his people was a warning as bowstrings sang. Then the ground erupted with men about them. A numbing blow just below his shoulder almost sent Storm crashing from his saddle. His left arm hung heavy and limp as a blue-horned Norbie grabbed for his belt.

The Terran struck out with his other hand in a Commando blow but the weight of the falling native dragged him to the ground where they rolled into a pocket between two rocks. For a frenzied space of time Storm fought one-handed to keep a sword-knife from his throat. Only the fact that his first blow had practically disabled the Norbie saved his life. He brought his knee up and toppled the other off balance, rolling over again to send the Nitra senseless, sprawling out into the floor of the valley where the struggle was still in progress.

Storm struggled to his feet, only to collapse again as a stun ray clipped the side of his spinning head. He slid, bonelessly limp, behind the rocks and did not feel it when he landed full upon his wounded shoulder, driving the cruelly barbed arrowhead deeper into his flesh, snapping off its painted shaft.

Perhaps that second dose of the ray neutralized in a measure the effects of the first, for when Storm opened his eyes, he remembered clearly all that had happened just before his raying.

The bright sunlight had left the gorge and the small passage was chill, chill and very quiet. Shivering, catching his breath at the twinge in his stiff shoulder, Storm somehow dragged himself upright to lean against the small wall of rocks that had protected him. He must have been overlooked, he decided. The Nitra had not mutilated his body after their custom.

There were no bodies in the narrow way, though broken arrows, and churned earth, a splash or two of blood marked the field. Storm staggered into the open and attempted to read the trail. Bootmarks leading away – prisoners forced to walk?

Storm pressed his hand tightly over the ragged hole in his shoulder and squinted down at that mixture of hoof, boot, and Norbie tracks. With one hand out to fend him off from the walls he reeled along, heading for the garden cave.

Just how he reached the mouth of the outer doorway he could not tell. But he was there, calling softly for the two he had left behind. There was no reply out of the dark. Storm stumbled on, guided by the light seeping from the garden cavern. The doorway they had half-closed and then reopened was still unblocked. The Terran wavered in and went to his knees on the path between two flanking gardens.

'Logan!' He called weakly. 'Gorgol!' He could not get to his feet again. But somewhere there was a pine tree – and green grass – and the fragrance of the hills of home. Storm wanted that as much as he wanted cool water in his throat, an end to the burning pain in his shoulder, cool green grass and the arch of pine boughs over his head.

He was crawling now, and there was an object barring his path, a yellow-red barrier. He touched the softness of flesh, saw Gorgol's face turned up to his, the eyes closed, the mouth a little open. But the native was still alive. Storm could see the beat of a labouring pulse in a vein running beneath one of the ivory white horns. There were no visible wounds; the Norbie might have been peacefully asleep.

'Gorgol!' Storm shook him. Then raised his good hand and slapped the Norbie's face stingingly. Until at last those eyes opened and the native stared bewildered up at him. With one hand Storm asked his question:

'Who?'

Gorgol levered himself up, both hands going to his head. He moaned softly, pressed his fingers hard over his eyes, before he used them to answer.

'I come – go find water – Head hurt – fall – sleep –'

'Rayed!' Storm looked about him. There was no Logan, Surra and Hing were missing, as were the horses.

'Nitra?' He doubted that. Would the Nitra, who could hardly be familiar with a settler's side arm, use the ray on Gorgol?

'Nitra kill with arrows – knife –' Gorgol was signing. Then he caught sight of Storm's wound, that inch or so of arrow shaft showing out of the ragged tear. 'Nitra – that! Here?'

'Ambush – down valley –'

'Come!' Gorgol, one hand going again to his head as he arose, stooped to draw Storm up beside him. Supporting the Terran, he led him along through the maze of gardens. Until at last Storm realized that he was indeed lying on a bed of pine needles, looking up once more into the green tent of the Terran tree. Not too far away Gorgol had built a small pile of dry twigs and was now engaged in coaxing a spark from his firestone to ignite it. When a tongue of flame sent fragrant smoke curling up, the native drew his knife and passed its sharp point into the red heart of the fire.

Storm, guessing what was to come, watched those preparations grimly. They were necessary and he knew it. Logan was gone – the animals had vanished – but he must be able to carry on if they were to find either, or trace Quade's scouts. When the Norbie came across to him, the Terran managed a stretch of the lips that curved them briefly into something still far from the smile he intended.

'Arrow stay in – bad!' Gorgol's fingers spelled out the warning Storm did not need. 'Must cut out – now.'

Storm's good hand, moving restlessly through the carpet of needles on which he lay, closed on a small chunk of dead branch. He clenched his fingers about that in preparation.

'Go ahead!' Though Gorgol could not have understood what were to him meaningless sounds, he read the answer in Storm's eyes. And go ahead he did.

Norbies were deft and the Terran knew that probably this was not the first time Gorgol had operated to cut out an arrowhead from some companion. But to endure the probing, skilful as it was, was hard. And Storm remembered what Logan had said about the Spartan treatment for arrow wounds and what it cost the victim. He was lucky in that three of the barbs on this head remained intact as Gorgol freed the glassy

main section, and only one had to be located by deeper knife work.

Breathing hard and with a swimming head, Storm lay quiet at last while Gorgol slapped a mass of pulped wet leaves over the ragged wound and then raised his patient's head to let him sip water in a blessed flood of coolness down his parched throat. As the native settled Storm down again, he held his hands into the line of the Terran's vision and signed:

'Go – look for Logan – see who put Gorgol to sleep – hunt trail of evil ones –'

'Nitra –' Storm was too shaken to raise his hand in the proper movement. But again the Norbie appeared to understand.

'Not Nitra –' He wriggled his own right hand. 'Still have bow hand on wrist – Nitra take for Thunder House trophy. Think maybeso Butchers. We see –'

Storm shut his eyes, even on the welcome green of the branch over him. He aroused to a soft, warm weight on his good arm, a snuffling in his ear, and opened his eyes slowly. Over his head was a rustling, and a dark shape moved on a low swinging branch, a sharp beaked head was bent so glittering eyes could regard him.

'Baku!' The eagle mantled in answer to his call, replied with her own harsh cry.

The warm lump on his arm chirruped, and Storm heard Surra's purr rumble louder from beside him. For a moment of lazy content, not yet fully awake, the Terran lay unmoving. Then he tried to lift his left arm to caress Surra and felt the answering twinge in his shoulder, awaking him to full memory. The pain, as he experimented cautiously, was not nearly as bad as he expected. As on his first visit, this slice of a vanished world had worked its magic on him, and he was able to move with a measure of ease. In addition, the leafy plaster the Norbie had applied had dried hard, covering the wound and dulling the pain as if it had narcotic properties.

Gorgol must have returned and left again, for a small heap of objects taken from their supplies was piled not too far away. A battered canteen and one box of rations lay on the woollen blanket that had been his legacy from his grandfather. And beyond was some fruit laid out on a leaf plate.

Storm ate, with the greediness of a thoroughly hungry man. And as the minutes passed he had less and less trouble with his wound. He was trying to find the full extent of his disability when Gorgol came running lightly down the pathway toward the grassy oasis about the pine tree.

'You have found – what?' Storm demanded eagerly.

'Logan taken by Butchers. Butchers killed by Nitra. Logan – men with you – held by Nitra in other valley. Maybeso kill. Time of big dry comes, Nitra wizard makes magic to Thunder Drummers so rain come again. Kill captives for Thunder Drummers –'

'Nitra think that makes rain again?' Storm tried to put into signs his questions. 'Nitra fear rains never come unless kill prisoners?'

The Norbie nodded vigorously. Thunder Drummers live in high mountains, make rain, make growing things come. But sometimes too much rain – bad. Bad like too much dry. Storms worse in Nitra land than for Shosonna. So Nitra wizards give prisoners to Thunder Drummers – end big dry, not make bad rains if have prisoners to eat.'

'How do they give prisoners?'

Gorgol made a wide swinging sweep with one hand, ending in the gesture of one tossing an object out into empty space.

'Throw from high rock – maybeso. Not sure – Shosonna do not spy on Nitra wizards. Many, many Nitra guard around – kill those who watch if not Nitra.'

'Where?'

'Nitra camp over ridge. They wait – think they wish to kill Butchers. Also there are Shosonna in hills – maybeso fight with them.'

Refugees from the river village Dumaroy had tried to raid? These mountains were getting rather full now, Storm thought with a little smile. For some reason he felt almost absurdly confident. There was Dumaroy's crowd, and the posse now headed by Kelson, unless either or both had run into the Xik holdouts, or Nitras, or been ambushed by the aroused and thoroughly angry Shosonna. But it was the Nitra who interested Storm most at present. Kelso had been warned, and Dumaroy was not too far ahead of the Peace Officer – they would have to take their chances.

But the Nitra were holding Logan, Quade, Lancin and perhaps Quade's two riders. That was Storm's concern. He had one card to play. With the Shosonna or any semi-civilised Norbie tribe it might not work. But here he would be dealing with natives who should know very little about off-world men, especially any breed different from the settlers with whom they were only on raiding terms.

He outlined his plan as well as he could for Gorgol's benefit. And, to his pleased surprise, the native did not object, instead he answered readily enough:

'You have wizard power. Larkin say your name mean weapon of Thunder Drummers in his tongue –'

'In my tongue also.'

Gorgol nodded. 'Also Nitra not see bird totem like this one, nor other animals who follow you. Horses men may ride, zamble they can trap. But a frawn eats not from a man's hand, or rubs head against him for notice. Nitra wizard commands no animals. So you may walk into their camp without meeting arrow. But maybeso you not come out again – that is different –'

'Could Gorgol find Shosonna in the mountains to help?'

'Wide are the mountains. And before sunrise the Nitra wizards make their magic.' The Norbie's hands sketched the killing sign. 'Better Gorgol use this.' From his belt holster he whipped the ray rod. 'Use such magic on them!'

'You have only one charge left –' Storm pointed out. 'When that is used, all you will have is a rod without power –'

'And this!' The Norbie laid his hand on his knife hilt. 'But there be much warrior honour in this deed. When the fire of men is lighted, Gorgol can stand forth and tell great deeds before the face of twenty clans, and there shall be none to say it is not so –'

Storm made his preparations carefully. Once more he turned his face into a mask with improvised paint. The folded blanket lay across his shoulder to hide Gorgol's protecting plaster of leaves, its ends thrust through the concha belt. He surveyed himself in a greenish mirror of one of the water garden pools, tearing a rag from a supply bag to hold his untidy hair out of his eyes. And the image the water presented was a barbaric figure, one which certainly should hold attention in the Nitra assembly, even without the addition of the team.

The Terran could not bear Baku's weight on his injured shoulder for the full trip and he had to coax her out of the cavern as he carried Hing, and Surra walked beside him. Gorgol told him the eagle had come from the sky the day before, just preceding the attack of the Butchers, and had vanished into the garden cave where Surra and Hing had chosen to prowl on their own concerns.

Storm concentrated as he came into the open upon holding the animals' attention, preparing them to aid him in any necessary attack. Gorgol's night sight aided them again as they climbed a twisting way up to the heights. But tonight there were moons, and when they won from the maw of the valley, they crossed a brilliantly lighted slope.

The Terran went slowly, conserving his strength, accepting the Norbie's assistance over rough places. The wind was changing, bearing with it a low muttering of sound that aped the roll of thunder. They reached a ledge that Gorgol turned to follow, one hand ready to lead or support the Terran. And that narrow and perilous path took them around the spur of an outcrop, through an arch of stone, onto a wider platform where there was a muddle of dried sticks under an overhang.

Gorgol kicked at some of the rubbish to clear a path and signed:

'Evil flyer.'

This must have been the eyrie from which he had pursued the wounded monster on the day it led him into the valley of the Sealed Caves. But by all indications the bird had had no mate, nor had its untidy nesting place been claimed by another.

The nest ledge was above another. With Gorgol's hand on his belt, Storm swung over by one hand and dropped to this, wondering how often he could equal that feat if called upon to do so tonight. However, this cutting led on around the side of the cliff and there was the red of fire beyond, a red that suddenly puffed vivid sparks of green into the air, along with a suffocating odour.

'Wizards!' Gorgol's fingers wriggled.

As the green sparks cleared, Storm discovered that he was perched over a table-topped plateau, bare of any vegetation, but mounded here and there by weather-carved rocks, which assumed odd shapes in the semidarkness. Lashed to two such pillars were four men – settlers by their dress – while the space about the fire was crowded by squatting Norbies, intent upon the actions of two of their number who paced back and forth around the circle of the flames, beating on small tambours they held in their hands, so producing that deep thunder mutter.

Storm studied the scene. Either the Nitra felt secure from attack here or their sentries were very well hidden. He could detect none from his present stand. But there were men squatting beside the pillars to which the prisoners were bound, one each at the very feet of the captives.

'I am going in –' he signalled to Gorgol.



He beamed the silent summons to Baku who must be cruising overhead, felt Surra press reassuringly against him. Then the Terran made a slow descent of the drop immediately below him. As his boots struck the surface of the plateau he shouted aloud the rallying call of the team.

'Saaaaaaa –'

Out of the black sky Baku dropped, a thing that was a feathered part of the night endowed with separate life. Storm staggered a step or two as she set her claws in the blanket on his shoulder, resting her weight above the green wound. But he recovered swiftly and straightened under that necessary burden.

Then, with King wary against his breast, her eyes as bright as his necklace, and Surra, soft-footed beside him, showing her fangs in a snarl that wrinkled her lips, Storm walked confidently into the full light of the fire.

17

Comes now the Monster Slayer, wearing this one's moccasins, Wearing the body of the storm born one. Comes now the Monster Slayer, bowstring extended, Arrow notched upon it for the flying – Comes now the Monster Slayer – ready for battle –

Storm was no Singer, but somehow the words came to his tongue, fitted themselves readily together into patterns of power so that the Terran believed he walked protected by the invisible armour of one who talked with the Faraway Gods, was akin to the Old Ones. He could feel that power rise and possess him. And with such to strengthen him what need had a man for other weapons?

The Terran did not see the Nitra rows split apart to make him a pathway to the edge of the fire. He was not truly aware of anything except the song and the power and the fact that, at this moment, Hosteen Storm was a small but well-fitting part of something much greater than any one man could aspire to be –

He stood still now, bracing himself under the weight of Baku, not noting the pain that weight brought him. Before him was a blue-horned Nitra wizard, his tambour drum raised. But the native was no longer beating it, instead he was staring at this apparition out of the night.

'Ahuuuuuu!' Storm's voice spiralled up in the old war cry of his desert raiding people. 'Ahuuuuuu!'

The Nitra wizard thumped his drum, was answered by a roll of muted thunder. However, there was a hesitation in that reply, which Storm sensed more than saw. The native made talk in his own high-pitched voice. To that the Terran did not reply with finger-talk. This was no time to betray kinship with the settlers and their ways. He turned to face the four prisoners, saw recognition leap to life in Logan's eyes, surprise dawn in Quade's.

Power is in this one's arm – power is in this one, The Monster Slayer wears now this one's body – He walks in this one –

Surra moved with Storm, matching her soft padding to his deliberate pace. He released King from his hold. The meerkat scurried, a grey shadow touched to life by the fire, to the nearest pillar. Rising on her hind legs, she attacked the prisoners' bonds with teeth and claws. Storm gestured and Surra moved as quickly to Logan and his partner at the other post, to chew at the hide thongs about their bodies.

The Nitra priest squalled like an enraged yoris and sprang at Storm shaking his tambour. Baku mantled, her fierce eyes on the native, screaming with rage. She took off into the air and came down to do as she

seldom did, attack from ground level, as she had faced the zamle in Krotag's village. And the Nitra gave ground before her bristling fury, so that bird drove man around the fire and there was a shrilling chorus of wonder from the watching warriors.

'Power is now ours!' Storm exulted in a song perhaps only one other within hearing could understand. But if the words were unknown the meaning was clear and as he moved forward again the Nitra cowered away from him.

Quade stepped away from the pillar where he had been bound and Storm saw him shake off cut thongs. Gorgol had played his part back in the shadows. The settler jumped to catch the staggering Logan, but the younger man's hand rested on Surra's head for a moment – an attention the big cat had never before permitted from any save Storm – and he was once more steady on his feet.

'Let us go forth in power –' The Terran's voice arose above the screaming rage of Baku. Surra led the retreat with Quade supporting his son, the riders crowding behind. Hing ran to Storm and climbed his leg, hooked her claws in his breeches.

'Go forth in power –' Storm put full urgency into that order. He moved between the retreating men and the restless Nitra. How long he could hold the natives Storm had no idea, but at this moment he had no doubts that he could hold them. Only a very few times in his life had the Terran experienced this inner Tightness, this being a part of a bigger pattern that was meant to work smoothly. Once when he first had his orders obeyed as team leader by the animals and Baku – twice during his service days when that team carried through a difficult assignment with perfect precision. But this in its way was again different, for the power flowed through him alone.

This one walks in power – This one carries power – This one works the will of the Old Ones, The Old Ones who walk in beauty, This one serves –

The rescued had gone beyond the rim of the firelight.

'Saaaaaa –'

Baku came to him. The Norbie wizard had a bleeding gash on his forearm and he no longer held the tambour. There was bitter hatred in his eyes and a knife ready in his hand. As Baku settled again on Storm's shoulder the Nitra followed her in the arching spring of an attacking yoris.

He reached Storm only to go down with the stiff jerk of a man who had been rayed. And from the massed warriors there arose a wailing cry. It was then that Storm laughed. This was a night in which nothing could go wrong! Gorgol had used his rod at the right moment as he had earlier used his knife. They were all riding one of the waves of phenomenal luck that sometimes overtakes tides of action and can be used to carry a man on their crest until he is able to achieve the impossible. The Singers were right. At that moment full belief in the unseen powers of his people flooded through Storm, burning away all doubts. He was truly possessed and no Nitra – no – nor Xik – could stand successfully against him!

He withdrew stride by stride backwards to the edge of the light where he must climb to the heights.

'Over here, Storm –' came a low call just before the Nitra pack screeched their fear and anger aloud – though no warrior ventured in pursuit. A hand caught his arm, pulled him up to the cliff wall.

'Where did you come from?' Quade demanded. 'We thought you were dead!'

Storm laughed again. The intoxication that filled him still bubbled.

'Far from dead,' he said. 'But we had better get out of here before they recover nerve enough to come hunting –'

His exultation held as they climbed back to the ledge of the deserted nest, worked their way around to the valley of the Sealed Cave. But at the mouth of that same cave he halted.

'Listen!' His tone was so sharply commanding that the men about him were silent.

And it was not so much a noise that they heard as a vibration, which came to them through the walls of stone, from the earth under their feet.

"The Xik ship!" Storm knew that trembling of old. He had sheltered in hiding to watch the enemy take-off from hidden ports he had been sent to locate and harass. Always there had been that shaking of the earth as the alien ships had warmed to their take-off.

'What –?' Quade demanded.

The Xik ship – it is getting ready to take off. They may be leaving Arzor!

Quade, one arm about Logan, put his other hand to the cliff surface.

'What a vibration!'

Too much so. Storm was conscious of that suddenly. The ship he had seen in the hidden valley was no intergalactic transport – it was hardly larger than a converted scout. This tearing was too much! Another Xik craft hidden somewhere near? Only now that throbbing came raggedly –

There was a roar that filled the night, a torch of light that shot miles high from the mountains. Around them the cliffs trembled, miniature landslips started, and they crouched together, men and animals, in a terrified huddle.

The tubes – they must have blown! Storm was on his feet again, his hand pressing against his shoulder where the sharp bite of pain gnawed once more. He had been torn out of his self-hypnotism, thrown into the weariness of near exhaustion.

'What tubes?' Logan's question came thinly as if some muffling veil hung between them.

The Xiks had their ship partly buried for concealment. They were digging her out when you escaped. But if they were pressed for time they might have tried to take her up without being sure of thoroughly clean tubes – or else' – Storm glanced down at the ball of whimpering fur he held, one sorely frightened meerkat – 'or else King pulled one of her tricks. When they tried to lift the ship, the tubes blasted it wide open!'

'So they blew themselves up!' Brad Quade squared his shoulders. 'But there might be something to see to over there, perhaps some of our boys were involved and need help. It might be well to check –'

'One of those other grills in the garden cave –' Logan cut in weakly. There was a north-western one pointing in the right direction. If we could find another tunnel from that it would take us straight through –'

Whatever shaking up the mountain had received, the garden cavern remained apparently untouched. Though the newcomers were awed by the bits of strange worlds divided by the black paths, they did not linger. Gorgol sped ahead, the rest trying to match his pace. A quarter of the way around the cavern they came to the grill Logan had found on his first exploration.

They mastered the latch and were fronting another tunnel which, with its curiously dead air and blackness, engulfed them wholly, for this time there was no torch to light the way. Surra pressed on with Gorgol, eyes of cat and native not so baffled by the gloom, the others strung out behind. All were driven by a gnawing desire to be through this passage and out into the normal world of Arzor once again.

It was easy to lose one's sense of direction here in the dark and the tunnel did not run straight. Whether it followed the easy path of some natural fault in the mountain, or whether its long-ago builders had intended the turns to bewilder, Storm could not guess. But after two twists, he was at sea. For all he could determine, they might be heading back into the cavern they had just left. Baku moved restlessly on his shoulder, he lurched to one side, scraping against the unseen wall for support, hearing close by the heavy breathing of one of his companions, and then Logan's assurance, fiercely uttered to his father, that he could keep up in spite of his injured leg.

Another twist, and a spark in the dark ahead, a light that grew to a reflected glow as if some giant fire raged beyond. They hurried on at that promise of escape.

Now the off-worlders caught up with Gorgol and the cat, to look out into a well of fire. Those flames ate along the terraces of the valley of the ship. And the heat from the conflagration beat in at them. Gorgol wriggled through a slit of door and Storm edged after him, giving Baku her flight signal. If there were any way out along the heights, she would find it for them.

Seeing that whirl of flames below, the Terran believed that nothing within that bowl of mountain walls could have survived the blowup of the overdriven ship. Sparks came up in the suck of air as they edged about the small walled space that long ago might have been a sentry point, to put a crag between them and the full force of the heat.

Even here the light approached that of day and they discovered Surra at the head of a flight of stairs. They were hardly more than niches gnawed away by the elements, down which a man could edge only at his peril. But they were a way down with the full bulk of the peak between them and the raging inferno of the blasted valley.

Surra's species were sure-footed. The pumas of the western continent, a breed crossed with her dune cat ancestors in the experimental laboratories, were adept at climbing cliffs and crossing ridges where neither man nor hunting hound dared to follow. However, now she was examining this drop narrowly, advancing one paw as if to test the stability of that first weatherworn step.

Something in its feel must have reassured her, for she flowed down with liquid grace until she came out some hundred feet below in a shadowed space which appeared much larger than the platform on which Storm and Gorgol lingered. Storm hitched over that drop, only he crawled down those niches on his hands and knees. The heat of the opposite valley was cut off, and when he reached the ledge, he saw that from this point a roadway took the down curve, cut into the rock in the obscurity of the dark side of the mountain.

'A road –' Gorgol signed in the moonlight. 'Below – a wider one – running so –' He gestured southeast.

Perhaps this was part of that other way into the valley up which the raiders had driven their stolen horses

and frowns. If so, its other end should bring them out on the plains.

'Return –' Storm signed. 'Bring the others here –'

Gorgol was already climbing, his tall body ascending that ladder easily. Storm went on. Surra quested ahead, scouting in advance. The Terran had a feeling that he must keep moving now – that if he rested, as his body craved, he would not be able to move on again. He started down that narrow pathway hacked in the side of the mountain, overhung in places where the builders had bored a half-tunnel to accommodate the traveller. These peaks might all be honeycombed, he thought, by caverns and tunnels, and other hidden ways of the long-ago invaders. Sorenson had been proved right and Survey must be informed.

Surra came out of the dark and pressed against his legs, making a barrier of her body in a warning of immediate danger. Storm swayed, retrieved his balance, listened. Then he caught the faintest noise – scrape of boot on rock? Metal against stone? Someone was coming up to meet him and that lurker could be anyone from a Nitra scout to an Xik who had escaped from the burning hell of the valley.

There were voices from behind too. The Quades and the riders were coming down under Gorgol's guidance. And the Terran believed that the creeper below must have heard them also. Steadying himself against the rocks, he leaned as close to Surra as he could.

'Find –' That order was a faint whisper, underlined by mental force. She left him noiselessly to go into action – to flush out of hiding any enemy who might set up an ambush on the lower roadway.

At his belt was the only weapon Quade's party had been able to spare him earlier – one of the long bladed hunting knives. Storm drew it, holding the weapon point up as a fencer might hold his épée. So much depended upon the identity of that hidden enemy. Against a Nitra one method of attack, but Xiks did not fight with knives – And what chance had a knife against a blaster or a slicer?

Storm's progress became a stumbling run – with small pauses every five steps or so to listen. Surra had not yet flushed her quarry. A turn in the trail, the way jackknifed back on the level below. The Terran made that turn panting. It never occurred to him to share the struggle ahead with any of the men he had left on the upper trail. Storm was too used to fighting his own battles with only his team to back him. And this tangle with Xik forces had returned him to his service days, so that now, half-dazed with fatigue and the pain of his wound as he was, the enemy ahead was in his mind his own affair.

Another turn and the trail was widening – levelling off. To his left there was a darkened gash leading back into the side of the mountain. And it was here that the sudden beam of light flashed out, caught the last quarter of a yellow-brown tail but did not entrap the rest of Surra.

'Ahuuuuuu!' Storm shouted and cast himself to the left, bringing up with a little gasp of agony against a rock wall. That light flashed again to where he had stood only a second earlier.

His distracting tactics were successful. Surra squalled and attacked in her own way. The flash bobbed crazily and then fell to ground level, making a straight path of light across which Storm must go if he aided the cat.

Then a figure staggered out into the moonlight, with flailing arms. Settler! Or Xik in disguise? Storm moved out toward the torch hoping to turn it on that shape that was trying to ward off Surra. The big cat had not gone in to kill, but to harass, to keep her opponent moving until Storm arrived.

The ex-Commando stooped, picked up the torch awkwardly and then swung well around. There was no mistaking that whirling, dodging figure spotlighted in the beam – Bister!

'Saaaaaa –'

Surra flattened her body to the ledge, her ears back against her skull, her mouth a snarl, her tail lashing as the fur raised in a stiffly pointed ridge along her spine. Though she was between Bister and retreat she did not leap.

Storm saw that the other's hand was going to a weapon at his belt.

'Hold it – right there!' he ordered.

The big man, his face patterning his emotions as fiercely as Surra's did hers, leaned a little forward, his hand opening with visible reluctance, rising inch by grudging inch in the beam of light.

The Terran!' He mouthed the word as if it were obscene, making of it both an oath and a challenge.  
'Animal –'

'Beast Master!' Storm corrected him in his gentle voice, the one that marked him at his most dangerous.

He thrust his knife into the front of his belt and came on unhurriedly, holding the light on Bister until he was within arm's distance. Then he moved with some of Surra's lightning swiftness, pulling the stun rod from the other's holster, tossing the weapon out and over the edge of the drop.

But Bister was quick, too. His hand streaked for his knife in one last bid for freedom. The fine super-steel of the off-world blade was blue fire in the torchlight as he bent in the crouch of the experienced fighter. And Storm realized that, Xik aper or not, the man facing him could use that weapon.

'Send in your cat, why don't you – animal man!' Bister grinned, his teeth showing in the light almost as sharp and pointed as Surra's. 'I'll mark her – just as I'll gut you – Terran!'

Storm backed, raised his hand, and jammed the torch into a small crevice of the rock. He was a fool, he supposed, to fight Bister. But something within him compelled him to front the other – whoever or whatever he might be – with only bare steel between them. It was the old, old war of the barbarian fighting man who was willing to back his cause with the power of his own body.

'Surra –' Storm motioned to the cat. She remained where she was at the top of the down trail, her eyes bright, watching the men facing each other in the path of light. And she would not move unless he so ordered.

Storm's knife was again in his hand. For a moment the weariness of his body was forgotten, his world had narrowed to those two bared blades. He heard and did not mark a cry from uptrail as the men there caught sight of the scene on the ledge.

But if the Terran did not mark that exclamation Bister did. And the big man rushed, wishing to make a beginning and an end all in one attack before the others could move to Storm's assistance.

Storm dodged and knew a small bite of dismay at the slowness of his movement. But, as it had in the Nitra camp, his purpose possessed him, dampening out physical weakness. Only now his body did not obey with the speed and perfection he needed for safety.

Bister was conscious of that, and knew that Storm was not now the same man he had faced between the Port and the Crossing. He struck quickly, with expert precision.

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Blade rang on blade as Storm met that attack. But Bister was boring in, confidence behind each move as he forced the Terran to retreat. Storm tried to weave a pattern of small feints and withdrawals that would bring him around so that full glare of the torch beam would strike in the other's face. Bister was well aware of that danger and he did not advance as Storm gave way.

He could end this in a moment, the Terran knew, by one summons to Surra. But he must face Bister out by himself – standing on his own two feet, steel against steel – or else he could never command the team again.

Time had no meaning as their boots shuffled warily on the rock ledge. After his first leap of attack was countered, Bister, too, became careful, willing to wear down the slighter Terran. Storm felt a small wet trickle under the blanket on his shoulder and knew that his wound must have reopened under that protecting plaster of leaves. That trickle would drain his strength even more, put weights on his feet, just when he needed all the agility he could command.

It was he who was being forced into the path of the light, and once Bister had him blinded in the full glare of that beam he would be pinned helplessly. His thoughts raced, assembling all he knew of the apers. They had been given bodies to resemble his own, training that would make them react as closely as possible to the human. Yet still inside they must remain truly Xik, no matter how conditioned their cover or they would be of no use to their superiors. And the Xik – what set of circumstances would throw an Xik fighter off guard, rattle him badly? What would be his worst fears, his ultimate terror? Why had there always been war to the end between them and the human species?

Storm shuffled, danced, evaded by a finger's small breadth a wily rush that would have pushed him into the danger zone. Why did the Xik fear and hate the Terrans? What was the deep-set base of that fear and could he play upon it now?

His thoughts were cut by the clash of steel meeting steel as the hilt of his own weapon was driven back almost to his breast and the jar of that blow numbed his arm for an instant. All the sixth sense that Storm drew upon when he worked with the team was alert behind the defences of his well-trained body.

Then – as if that flash of knowledge came from some source outside his own mind – Storm knew, knew the weakness of the Xik, because in a manner it was his own weakness by racial inheritance, a weakness peculiar in turn to the Dineh also, a weakness that could also be a kind of strength, so that men clung to it for the security they desired.

'You stand alone –' He spoke those words in Galactic, his tone level. 'Your kind have blown themselves up back there, Bister. There is no ship waiting to take you from Arzor. Alone – alone – one among the many who hate you. Never shall you see your home world again! It is lost among the nameless stars.'

He knew in that same burst of understanding why the Xik had destroyed Terra – they had hoped to kill the heart of the Confederacy with that one bold stroke. But because the races bred on Terra differed, because her colonies were already mutating from their original breed, that scheme had failed.

'Alone!' He flung that single word with an upthrust of his Singer voice, trying to put into it the power he

had felt when facing the Nitra wizard. Bister was alone, and so was Storm. But in this moment the agony of the old loss was dulled for the Terran. He could use that taunt as a weapon, and it carried no backlash to tear him in return.

'Alone!' He could see Bister's eyes, dark, wide, and he saw, too, that small flame of desperation deep in them. Beneath his aper disguise the Xik was stirring. Storm must bring that alien up to the surface, set the buried self to struggling against the disciplined outer shell.

'No one to back you here, Bister. No cell brothers, no battle mates. One Xik left alone on Arzor to be hunted down –'

All the scraps of briefing the Terran had heard concerning the invaders and their customs came flaming into his mind, clear, distinct, lying ready to his use, as his feet circled in the motions of the duel.

'Who will cover your back, Bister? Who will raise the name shout for you? None of your brothers shall know where you died or mark your circle on the Hundred Tablets in the Inner Tower of your clan city. Bister shall die and it shall be as if he never lived. Nor will he have a name son to take up his Four Rights after him –'

Coll Bister's mouth hung open a little and there was the glisten of moisture on his forehead, shiny on his cheeks and jaw. That alien spark in his eyes grew stronger.

'Bister shall die and that is all. No awakening for him by the Naming of Names –'

'Yaaaaah!'

The aper charged. But Storm had been warned by a momentary tenseness in his enemy's body. He swerved with much of his old spontaneous grace. The other's blade caught in the silver necklace on the Terran's breast, scored stingingly across his chest. And the force of Bister's body striking his drove Storm back to the very edge of the ledge.

For fear of being forced over the drop Storm grappled, knowing his danger. The aper was unwounded, strong enough to crush the Terran's resistance. Storm could only use all the tricks of Commando fighting that he knew. One of them brought him out of that grip and reeling back to safety under the undercut.

Bister gave a shrill whine. His eyes were nonhuman now, filled only with the fear and loss Storm had hammered into his alien brain. Every belief that had bolstered his kind when they went into battle had been ripped to tatters by an enemy he hated above all others. He lived only for one thing now – to kill – not caring if his own death was the price he must pay for success.

And because he had slipped over the edge of sanity he was more dangerous and yet easier to handle. Storm backed and Bister followed, his crooked fingers grasping at the air before him.

Storm raised his own hand, flat, ready. Then he pivoted and what he had worked for happened. Bister blundered into the direct beam of the torch. For a moment his crazed eyes were blinded and Storm's blow landed, clean and unhurried, as he might have delivered it on the drill field.

The aper gave a light cough that was half grunt and collapsed slowly forward, going to his knees, and then on to his face, to lie unmoving. Storm reeled back until his good shoulder met rock and he was supported by it. He watched Surra creep, her belly fur brushing the ledge, to sniff at Bister. She snarled and would have raised a paw with claws ready to rake, but the Terran hissed an order at her.



Brad Quade crossed the path of the light, knelt beside the aper. He turned the man over, felt for a heartbeat beneath the torn shirt.

'He is not dead.' Storm's voice was thin and faraway even in his own ears. 'And he is truly Xik –'

He saw Quade rise quickly, come toward him. Tired as he was, the Terran could not bear to have the other touch him. He drew away from the wall, to avoid Quade's outstretched hand. But this time his will did not command his body and he crumpled, one hand falling across Bister's inert body as he went down.

The picture had been part of Storm's dreams. Yet now that he opened his eyes and lay without strength to move on the narrow bed, it was still there, covering one wall with a bold sweep of colours he knew and loved. There were the squared mesa of the south-western desert on his own world, above that the symmetrical rounded cloud domes first developed by Dineh painters when they worked with sand as their only material. And there was a wind blowing about that mesa. The Terran could almost feel it as he saw the hair of the painted riders whipped about their faces, the manes of their spotted ponies pulled across their eyes. The mural covered the wall beside his bed and Storm slept with his head turned toward it so that those riders in the wind were the first thing he saw when he had strength enough to raise his heavy eyelids. The artist who had created that scene had ridden in the desert winds of home, been torn by their force, had known well the scent of wool and sage, of twisted pine, and the dull, sun-heated sand. To watch that painting was like waking under the pine tree in the cavern of the gardens, and yet this was more closely Storm's than the tree, the grass, the flowering things of his lost earth. Because this was a thing of beauty brought to life by one of his own blood. Only an artist of the Dineh could have pictured this –

The painted wall was far more real to him just then than those who came to tend his body. For Storm, the medic from the port and the silent, dark-faced woman who came and went were both shadows without substance. Nor was he able to emerge from his picture-world to answer Kelson's questions when the Peace Officer had appeared beside his bed – the Arzoran was far less distinct to Storm than the nearest spotted pony. He did not know where he was, nor did he care. He was content to share his waking hours and his longer periods of dreaming with the riders on the wall.

But at last those periods of wakefulness grew longer. The dark woman insisted upon piling pillows to bolster his shoulders, lifting him so that he could not watch the wall in comfort. And he realized that she spoke to him shortly, even sharply, in the Dineh tongue, as one might who was impatient with a child proving stubborn. Storm tried to cling to his languid dreams – only to have them torn from him abruptly when Logan limped in. The mask of bruises had faded from the other's face, so that Storm traced there something more than just the signature of Dineh blood, a teasing resemblance to a memory he could not quite recall.

'You like it?' The younger Quade looked beyond Storm to the mural, that section of Terran desert, untamed, but captured for all time on an Arzoran wall.

'It is home –' Storm answered truthfully and knew how revealing both words and tone were.

'That is what my father thinks –'

Brad Quade! Storm's right hand moved across the blanket that covered him, its thin brownness crossing one familiar stripe to the next. His covering was Na-Ta-Hay's legacy, or if not, one enough like it to be its twin. Na-Ta-Hay and the oath he had demanded of Storm – and Brad Quade's death lay at the core of that oath.

The Terran lay hoping for the familiar spur of anger to toughen his resolution. But it did not come. It was as if he could feel only one thing now – longing for that pictured land. Yet even if there was no anger to back it, the oath still rested on him and he must do what he had come to Arzor-

Storm had half-forgotten Logan, but now the younger man rose from the chair he had chosen and moved forward to the mural, his eyes on those wind-battered riders. There was a shade of wistfulness in his face, and none could ever doubt his kinship with the men pictured there.

'What was it like?' he asked abruptly. 'How did it make a man feel to ride so across that country?' Then he was conscious of the hurt that memory might deal, and a darker flood crept up his clean jawline. He turned his head to the bed, his eyes troubled.

'I left that life,' Storm picked his words with care, 'when I was a child. Twice I returned – it was never the same. But it stays, deep in one's mind it continues to live. The one who painted that – for him it lived. Even here, far across the star lanes, it lived!'

'For her –' Logan corrected softly.

Storm sat up, away from his bolstering pillows. He could not know how stone-hard his face had become. He did not have a chance to voice his question.

Another stood in the doorway, the big man with the compelling blue eyes, the man Storm had come to find and yet did not want to meet. Brad Quade walked to the foot of the bed and looked down at the Terran measuringly. And Storm knew that this was to be the last meeting of all, that in spite of his queer inner reluctance, he must force the issue and be ready to face the consequences.

With some of his old speed of action the Terran's hand went out, caught at the knife in Logan's belt, and jerked it free, resting the blade across his knee, its point significantly toward Brad Quade.

Those blue eyes did not change. The settler might have been expecting that very move. Or else he did not understand what it implied. But that Storm did not believe.

He was right! Quade knew – accepted the challenge – or at least recognized the reason for it for the other was speaking:

'If there is steel between us, boy, why did you bring me out of the Nitra camp?'

'A life for a life until our last accounting. You kept the blade out of my back at the Crossing. A warrior of the Dineh pays his debts. I come from Na-Ta-Hay. Upon Na-Ta-Hay and upon his family you have set the dishonour of blood spilled – and other shame –'

Brad Quade did not move, except to step closer to the foot of the bed. When Logan stirred, he signalled with his hand in an imperative order that kept his son where he was.

'There is and was no blood spilled between the family of Na-Ta-Hay and me,' he replied deliberately. 'And certainly no shame!'

Storm was chilled. He had never believed that Quade would deny his guilt when they at last faced each other. From his first sight of the settler he had granted him the virtue of honesty.

'What of Nahani?' he asked coldly.

'Nahani!' Quade was startled. He leaned forward, his big brown hands grasping the footrail of the bed, breathing a little faster as if he had come running to this meeting. And Storm could not mistake the genuine surprise in his tone.

'Nahani,' repeated the Terran deliberately. Then struck by a possible explanation for the other's bewilderment, he added:

'Or did you never know the name of the man you killed at Los Gatos –?'

'Los Gatos?' Brad Quade stooped, as if striving to bring his blue eyes on a level with the dark ones Storm raised to meet them. 'Who – are – you?' He spaced those words with little breaths between, as if each were forced from him by that sharp point still in Storm's hold.

'I am Hosteen Storm – Nahani's son – Na-Ta-Hay's grandson –'

Brad Quade's lips moved as if he were trying to shape words, and finally they came:

'But he told us – told Raquel – that you were dead – of fever! She – she had to remember that all the rest of her life! She went back to the mesa for you and Na-Ta-Hay showed her a walled-up cave – said you were buried in it – That nearly killed her, too!' Brad Quade whirled, his broad shoulders undefended to Storm's attack. He balled his hands into fists, brought them down against the wall as if he were battering something else, a shadow not concrete enough to take the punishment he craved to deal out.

'Blast him! He tortured her on purpose! How could he do that to his own daughter?'

Storm watched that sudden rage die as Quade's control snapped into place. The fist became a hand again, reached out to touch with delicate tenderness, the edge of the mural.

'How could he do it? Even if he were such a fanatic –' Quade asked again, wonderingly. 'Nahani wasn't killed – at least by me. He died of snake bite. I don't know what you've been told – a twisted story apparently –' He spoke quietly and Storm slumped back against his pillows, his world unsteady. He could not fan dead anger to life. Quade's sober voice carried too much conviction.

'Nahani was attached to the Survey Service,' Quade said tiredly. He pulled a chair to him, dropped into it, still eyeing Storm with a kind of hungry demand for belief. 'I was, too, then. We worked together on several assignments – and our Amerindian background led us to close friendship. There was trouble with the Xik on some of the outer planets and Nahani was captured in one of their sneak raids. He escaped and I went to see him at the base hospital. But they had tried to "condition" him –'

Storm tensed and shivered. Quade, seeing his reaction, nodded.

'Yes, you can understand what that meant. It was bad – he was – changed. The medic thought perhaps something could be done for him on Terra. He was sent home for rehabilitation. But during the first month, he got away from the hospital – disappeared. We learned later that he made his way back to his own home. His wife and son were there, a two-year-old child.

'Outwardly he appeared normal. His wife's father – Na-Ta-Hay – was one of the irreconcilables who refused to acknowledge any change or need for change in the native way of life. He was fanatic almost past the point of strict sanity. And he welcomed Nahani back as one rescued from the disaster of

becoming Terran in place of Dineh. But Raquel, Nahani's wife, knew that he must have expert help. She got word of his whereabouts to the authorities without her father's knowledge. I was asked to go with the medic to pick him up because I was on leave and I was his friend – they hoped I could persuade him to come in peaceably for treatment.

'When he discovered we were coming, he went on the run again. Raquel and I followed him into the desert. When we found his hidden camp, he was already dead – of snake bite. And when Raquel returned to her father's place for her baby, he was like a wild man – he accused her of betraying her husband, of turning traitor to her people, and drove her off with a gun.

'She came to me for help, and with guards we went to get her child – only to be shown a grave, the walled-up cave. Raquel collapsed and was ill for months. Afterwards we were married, I resigned from the service and brought her to my home here, hoping in new surroundings she could forget. I think she was happy – especially after Logan was born. But she only lived four years – And that is the true story!'

The knife lay by itself on the blanket. Storm's hands were over his eyes, shutting out the room, allowing him to see into a place that was dark and alive with an odd danger he must face by himself, as he faced Bister back at the Peaks.

A blurred column of years stretched out behind him – separating him from that long-ago day when Na-Ta-Hay had impressed his bitter will upon a small awed boy to whom his grandfather was as tall and powerful as one of the fabled Old Ones – between now and the day just after he had landed at the Centre when Na-Ta-Hay's spirit seemed to spread like a shadow across all his memories and dreams of Terra, his now destroyed homeland. He had clung to that shadow of a man, and to the oath he had given, making them anchors in a reeling world. Storm had fostered a hatred of Quade because he had to have some purpose in life, though even then something deep within him had tried to repudiate it. He saw it all now – so clearly.

That was why he had shrunk from pressing the dispute at his first meeting with the settler. As long as he could postpone this settlement, so could he continue to live. After it, his life would no longer have any purpose.

Na-Ta-Hay had stood in his memory as a symbol for all that was lost. To cling to the task the other had set him had, in a strange way, kept Terra alive. They had been right at the Centre in their distrust of him, he had not escaped the madness of the worldless men, only his had taken another and stranger turn.

Now he was empty, empty and waiting for the fear that lurked just beyond the broken barrier to crawl in and possess him utterly. Na-Ta-Hay had left him no anchor, only delusion. Now he stood on the same narrow edge of sanity where Bister had walked. For his kind, like Bister, had to have roots. Roots of a land – of kin –

Storm did not know he was shivering, huddling down into his pillows, seeking oblivion, which would not come. His hands dropped from his face to lie limp on the lightning patterned slashes of the blanket, but he did not open his eyes. For he felt he dared not see that mural now, nor look at the man who had told the truth and made him face his own complete loss.

Warmth ringed his wrists, fingers tightened there as if to drag him out of the encroaching darkness.

'Here, too, is the family –'

At first the words were only sounds – then the meaning came, the words repeated themselves in his

empty mind. Storm opened his eyes.

'How did you know?' He begged assurance that true understanding of what he needed had prompted the choice of just those words, not chance.

'How did I know?' Brad Quade was smiling. 'Are the Dineh the only wise ones, son? Is there only one tribe who seek roots in their own earth? This was your home – always waiting. Your mother helped to make it. You have merely been a little late in arriving – about – let me see now – some eighteen Terran years!'

Storm did not try to answer that. His eyes went once more to the mural. But now it was only a painted wall, nostalgic, beautiful, not meant to hold a man in spell. He heard a quiet laugh from the doorway and glanced up. Logan must have gone – now he was back. He stood there with Baku riding his shoulder as she had so often ridden Storm's, with Surra flowing about his legs. The big cat came and put her forepaws on the bed and surveyed Storm round-eyed, while King chattered from the crook of Logan's arm.

'Rain is in the corral. He'll have to wait a few more days for your reunion –' Brad did not yet loose his hold on Storm's wrists. 'Here is your family – this is also the truth!'

Storm drew a single, long, shaky breath that was very close to something else. His hands lay quiet, drawing strength from that warm clasp.

'Yat-ta-hay,' he said. He was tired, so very tired, but the emptiness was filled with a vast and abiding content he was sure would never ebb again. 'Very, very good!'

The End

## About this Title

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