

THE THREE SUNS OF AMARA

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

THE EARTHMEN

Alexander Sherret: He believed that every man had a right to be himself, and he was ready to fight for that right.

Captain Maxton: He landed Alex on Amara—and left him.

Captain Bagshaw: He landed himself on Amara—and left himself.

THE NATIVES

Rosala: You could think of her as Circe, but it wasn't at all accurate.

Lee: He was trapped immovably between love and terror.

Canato: For him, one was company and two was a crowd.

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CHAPTER ONE



THERE WAS always something new under the Three Suns.

Always new and usually inexplicable—if not downright crazy.

On the astronomers' charts the Three Suns bore dull number-plates: CXY 927340, CXY 927341, CXY 927342. The men from Earth called them simply by their colors: Blue, Yellow, Red. It seemed more than coincidence that these were the three primary colors. But if it were more, who could explain it?

Who could explain even half of what happened in the everchanging light of the Three Suns?

For instance, there was the orbit between them of CXY 927340/2-A. (Men again ignored the number-plate. To them, it was Amara.) Amara was a coveted only child, a living planet, and the Three Suns shared it among themselves with scrupulous justice.

Ethically, that made sense. Physically, it was mad. Mathematicians, who had retained their sanity after years of grappling with the hoary Problem of the Three Bodies, would tend to sink into melancholy after attempting to produce on paper proof of what they indisputably saw in the vicinity of the Three Suns.

And this despite the whole mountain range of data concerning the vagaries of gravitational fields which had grown into being since interstellar travel became commonplace.

Blue, Yellow, and Red were spaced on the corners of an invisible equilateral triangle. Amara circled each sun in turn, rotating on its own axis as it went, providing rainbow-colored days for the Amarans, but never black night. The nearest to night, probably, was when Amara entered upon the passage between Blue and Red. Then the clouds were empurpled and people's faces seemed dark and strange.

But soon Yellow's contribution came to dispel the shadows, and when Amara swung around to the far side of Yellow the sky became bright indeed.

Between Yellow and Blue, grass-green was the light. Between Red and Yellow, a warm orange.

The juxtapositions of suns and planets, vaporous clouds and dust-clouds, were infinite. The skies of Earth seemed in retrospect like faded window drapes to one who'd seen the glowing, kaleidoscopic heavens of Amara.

One like Alexander Sherret.

Sherret remembered Earth with no particular regret. It was a place which everyone pretended was highly significant, if only because it was the cradle of humanity. The significance evaded Sherret. Amara was preferable; plainly, starkly, it mirrored the universe as it really was.

It was the Grand Doodle.

The Grand Doodler's conscious attention had been someplace else—someplace, maybe, that *was* significant—the while his subconscious idly sketched out the pointless pattern of the universe. An enormously intricate pattern, naturally, from the depths of an enormously intricate mind. But significance it had not. And men became clowns or bores when they assumed they knew, and dilated upon, the meaning of it all.

All men are Doodles. Why argue?

But when someone tries to thrust Hobson's choice down your gullet, you find yourself arguing.

Captain Maxton was doing the thrusting, and for him it was out of character; usually he had to be pushed.

“Make up your mind, Sherret. Are you a Goffist or a Reparist?”

“I'm a Sherretist, sir.”

“Cut the whimsy. I've got to know where I stand.”

“You should stand on your own feet, sir.”

The Captain flushed. He said rapidly, to divert attention from this giveaway, “I take it, then, that you're still a Reparist?”

“Oh, damn all 'isms,” said Sherret, impatiently. “Men are men. They're not Goffists, Reparists, Papists, Royalists, Chartists, Communists, Fascists, Buddhists, Methodists, Existentialists, or what you have.”

The Captain looked at him, or nearly. He said, “In any society everyone has to accept the rules, else that society collapses into anarchism.”

“I'm with you that far, sir.”

“Yes, but under Reparism the rules are too rigid. If you don't like 'em, you can't do much to change them. But a Goffist always gets his chance to change things, and change them as much as he likes. Remold them nearer to the heart's desire kind of thing. For a time, anyhow. Your turn to be Captain will come.”

“And go, sir.”

“Naturally. It's a law of life. Things come, things go. Else—stagnation. It's like a symphony orchestra, see? One instrument takes over from another. You've got to know when to stop. You can't blow your own trumpet all the time when the aim is harmony. Look, Sherret, I'm going to leave you alone for thirty minutes. Think it over. Then decide finally whether you're with us or against us. If you're against us, you don't belong here. And you can get to hell out of it. Go over to Bagshaw and his crew—if they'll have you. And if you get there. For if you go, you're going to have to walk all of the way on your two flat feet. I'm not risking what little transport we have on a dissenter. That's it. I'll be back in a half-hour.”

Captain Maxton strode out decisively. He would have liked to have slammed the

door to show just how decisive he could be. Spaceship doors weren't free swinging, however. This one sighed benignly shut behind him.

Sherret echoed the sigh. He relaxed on the bunk by the porthole. He began chewing on a B-stick to help along the relaxation. Like all spacemen, he'd had to break the smoking habit when he left Earth. If pipes were substitutes for feeding bottles at moments of regression into infancy, then a B-stick was a kind of teething ring. It helped when you felt like biting someone.

Thirty minutes to decide, and the decision was already made. No Goffism for him. Goff was a nut, a psychosociologist who advocated absolute rule by each qualified worker in a local community for a month, and absolute obedience by the rest—until their turn came.

The scheme was to have as many ideas put into practice as possible, instead of their languishing and dying untried. It was pragmatism plus. If an idea worked, it was true and good.

“General common sense will ensure the survival of the fittest ideas,” said the prophet of psychosociology.

Sherret reflected that Goff was inflated with theory and quite devoid of any real knowledge of human nature, its basic irrationality, its perversions, manias and erotic dreams. Absolute power corrupts absolutely. It was the scheme of a simple-minded crank to uncage innumerable really dangerous cranks.

It was a pity that the ship had succeeded in re-establishing contact with Earth, to learn that Goffism was being widely adopted back there. Maxton had jumped at it, of course. It was his chance to relinquish the responsibility he realized he should never have accepted.

Bagshaw was a different kind of man. Sherret couldn't imagine him handing over his ship to the assistant cook and staying in bed till noon because the assistant cook didn't believe in early rising.

“It's time to get me a new ship,” said Sherret aloud to the empty cabin.

There was an initial difficulty, however, about that. Bagshaw's ship, the *Pegasus*, had landed some three hundred miles away, at a place called by the natives Na-Abiza.

There was a lot of rough country in between. Largely unknown country, inhabited by unknown creatures. Maybe many, maybe few. Maybe hostile, maybe not. Judging from the samples of life hitherto encountered within a radius of twenty miles around Maxton's ship, there was the promise of novelty. The road to Na-Abiza should be interesting—so long as one remained alive and capable of interest.

Thoughtfully Sherret chewed on his B-stick and through the porthole watched the cyclorama of the sky as Amara cruised between her parent suns.

Captain Maxton returned as the chronometer ticked the last seconds of the half-hour.

“Well, Sherret?”

“I should be grateful if you’d pack me some sandwiches for the trek, sir. Preferably ham. With just a spot of mustard.”

Red and Yellow shared this sky, while Blue dominated the other side of the world. Sherret shaded his eyes with an orange hand and stared back into orange distance. He’d come five miles, maybe, and the ship was becoming difficult to pick out in the landscape. There were conical rocks around it, and the shape he thought was the ship’s nose was possibly only a rock.

When it came right down to it, a man felt lonely when he’d left the community he’d lived in for so long. It was a bitter sort of comfort to know that that community would presently dissolve into chaos, conflict, and possibly bloodshed.

But there it was. He must make his own way.

So far he had met, to speak to, only two Amarans, although he had seen others carefully not seeing him in the middle distance. For the most part, the local Amarans had steered clear of the humans since the obtuse Brewster had shot a fat and iridescent bird and brought it home for the cooking pot.

The bird turned out to be a council member in a colony of a highly intelligent species of Bird-Amarans. The blunder was, on the surface, forgiven, because there were Birds and birds on Amara, and the latter were truly bird-brained. Nevertheless, the Bird-Amarans afterwards made it plain that they classed humans with the bird-brains so far as intelligence went. And they did not fly within gunshot again.

All other intelligent Amarans also kept their distance. The two types of Amarans with whom the humans could be said to have established any contact were both humanoid and weak-minded.

Humanoid, anyhow. The feeble-mindedness was a spontaneous deduction, but some of the crew had had occasion to think twice about it.

The Earthmen had named the types the Paddies and the Jackies.

It was a Paddy whom Sherret first encountered on his trek. A hairy, stocky creature with a low gradient forehead and an apelike shamble. Thick was the adjective applied to him—thick in build, in speech, in head.

He greeted Sherret surlily, “Don’t kill me, human, because if you do I shall kill you.”

This typical kind of remark had earned the creature its sobriquet.

Sherret smiled. “Don’t be afraid, I shan’t kill you. I’m only out for a walk. Have you ever been to Na-Abiza?”

“Yes, I have, human, but I didn’t get there.”

“Why not?”

“Because it wasn’t there when I got there.”

“But you just said you didn’t get there.”

“Of course I didn’t, human, if it wasn’t there.”

“Well, is it there now?”

“How can I tell? I’m here, not there.”

Sherret laughed and abandoned the attempt. Such crosstalk could go on indefinitely. In trying to learn something of the nature of the flora and fauna of Amara by questioning the dour Paddies, the Earthmen had achieved a state of utter confusion. Lifeforms here were weird, certainly. Maybe the Paddies had the right approach in describing them in terms of Irishisms.

He bade the Paddy good-bye and walked on.

He ran into the Jackie a mile further on. When a Jackie stood upright he was, on the average, eight feet tall. As his spine was rubbery he seldom stood upright. Jackies were fleshless and gangling, hinged at every point. The jaw hinge was particularly notable. When a Jackie laughed, the top half of his head lifted clear away. And Jackies always laughed.

Jackie was a diminutive of jackass.

“Good morning,” said Sherret.

The Jackie at once became convulsed with laughter. Jackies laughed at the slightest thing. At first you thought they were laughing at nothing at all. Then you tended to re-examine what you’d said. Perhaps you *had* said something funny. Or, at any rate, foolish.

Come to think of it, Sherret reflected, it was foolish to wish anyone good morning on Amara, where there was no morning. Nor afternoon, nor evening, nor night. It was always day—of a kind.

The laugh continued to saw through the still air, and Sherret reflected further that there was something disturbing about a Jackie’s laugh. It was more than a mere ass bray. There was a maniacal strain, like the release of the hysteria of a sex-killer at the moment of consummation. And yet there was more irony than cruelty in it. The laugher knew you were a fool, but knew that he was too. He was laughing at the nature of things which made sport of him and of you.

There was bitterness because he had been formed as he was. But this was countered by a note of triumph because in some non-human way he knew more about destiny than you could guess.

It was a devilishly knowing laugh. When it had died away, the Jackie asked in his peculiarly twanging voice, as though his vocal cords were of thin steel wire, “Where are you going, human?”

“Na-Abiza.”

Again Sherret waited patiently for the laugh to end. “Abiza,” in what seemed to be the common language of Amara (for even the Bird-Amarans shrilled it) was a verb as well as a place name. The verb described a bodily function. “Na” meant, variously,

no, negative, or unable.

“Na-Abiza” could mean constipation. Naturally, the Jackie chose to see it that way. When he had laughed his fill, and become untwisted and a recognizably humanoid shape again, the Jackie said, “I wish you an interesting journey. But beware of those who have only two, of those two become three, of that which becomes many.”

“Well, thanks a lot,” said Sherret. “But do you have to be so cryptic?”

Even on second thought he could see nothing particularly humorous in this question. But immediately the Jackie was again overtaken by helpless mirth. With repetition, this sort of reaction could become irritating.

“One day you’ll die laughing,” said Sherret, with a touch of impatience, and strode on.

It was some time before the unsettling sound was finally lost in the horny brush behind him.

Eventually he left the thorn belt, crossed an ankle-twisting area of loose rock, then climbed the ridge from which the rocks had rolled. It was there he paused for a parting look back at the ship—if it was the ship.

He’d come this far in this direction before, but he had only a rough notion of the terrain beyond the ridge. Somewhere there was a lake whose western edge he would have to skirt. He went onto the crest and then along it for some distance until he came to a high promontory. He scaled it.

From the summit he took survey. A plain stretched to the horizon. A small section of the horizon was thickened by a bright orange streak. That was the lake. He took a bearing, then picked his way down to the plain.

It was featureless and seemed interminable. Coarse grass matted it. Sometimes he walked springily over the thick tangle. Sometimes his foot sank into a loose patch of it and the grass wound itself around his boot as if it were trying to drag him below ground.

A breeze sprang up and rapidly strengthened to a wind. The grass stirred like the fur on a moving beast and the wind extracted a whistling tune from the rough stalks. From over the ridge behind him came sailing on the wind a ball of cloud, like an immense balloon. In Amara’s skies the rare clouds almost always formed compact balls. No one could explain why.

The twin pools of the cloud’s shadows came sliding, far apart, across the plain. One of them overtook Sherret.

Briefly, Yellow was eclipsed, and it was as though he had been plunged into a corner of the Inferno. Everything was fire-red.

The shadow passed. Later he glimpsed it traversing the lake like a moving patch of bright arterial blood. Then the other shadow, moving afar off and so seemingly more slowly, turned the lake water into molten gold as it went.

The cloud sank like a satellite over the horizon. The wind lost force and became feeble and directionless.

Sherret resolved to reach the lakeside and there have his first meal and a rest. He struggled on across the unfriendly grass. On and on, and yet he seemed to get nowhere. He began to wonder if the lake were a mirage receding before him.

Then, at last, the grass began to cling damply rather than tightly and he found he was plowing into the marshy verge. He halted. There was no definite edge to the lake; he was just walking gradually into it. He squelched back and found a reasonably dry spot. There he spread his waterproof, rested a while, then unfastened his big rucksack.

Captain Maxton had played fair. There was enough concentrated food to last an Earth month. Also plenty of more tasty fare, including ham sandwiches—with mustard. There was whiskey. Assorted utensils. And, in a shining plastic container, a delicate compass with a map folded within the lid compartment.

The magnetic field of Amara being what it was, the compass needed to be delicate.

The Captain had also supplied a machete, to double as implement and weapon. Lengths of thin, strong climbing rope, with the comment, “There may be precipices to negotiate. If not, you can always use it to hang yourself.” A battery-powered, electric needle-pistol and a case of small but powerful hand grenades, with the comment, “Hope you won’t need these, but you never know what you might bump into. If it’s too big for the pistol, use the grenades.”

“Thanks, Captain. Of course, if I don’t meet anything and get bored, I can always use the pistol to shoot myself.”

Already that exchange seemed a long time ago.

Sherret bit hugely at a sandwich and studied the map. Its lines ran off into the unknown about ten miles northwest of the lake. On the other side of the blank area the contours of Na-Abiza were sketched in. By the look of it, he had only to keep plugging north-northwest until he encountered them.

So long as the blank area didn’t contain any impassable obstacles.

He replaced the map, such as it was, in the compass box and picked up another sandwich. At which moment there came, from somewhere in the sky, a terrible scream.

He started, and looked up.

The scream was coming from a black, winged dot. The dot grew bigger. It was hurtling down at him. As it came, the scream rose rapidly in intensity. It was like having skewers pushed into his ears. The short sound waves seemed to pierce his skull like hard radiation.

He flung himself face down on the waterproof, pressing the heel of his palm tightly over each ear. This must be a Tek-bird. The Jackies had cackled about such a

species. Its paralyzing attack cry could split the very sutures of the skull, they said, and thought it a highly humorous end.

In experience, it was a long way from being a joke. Sherret found himself screaming with agony. “Stop, stop, stop!” shrieked his voice inside his skull, which indeed felt as if it were splitting apart.

There came a gusty backwash of air. The thing had passed over. The scream was dropping in pitch—the Doppler effect. Then it cut off abruptly.

It left his head singing. Slowly, he sat up, feeling bilious. The marshland seemed to be see-sawing around him.

Apprehensively, he looked around the sky. The Tek-bird was climbing after its swoop and beginning to veer. He feared another swoop—and there was no cover for miles. What was the thing seeking? His eyes? His food?

He glanced anxiously over his little scatter of possessions. The food hadn’t been touched. But the compass box was missing and the compass with it.

The Tek-bird, sweeping around in a flat loop, was heading back in his direction. He cringed. But it continued to fly level. As it neared he saw it was a huge, leathery creature like a pterodactyl. In its toothed beak the plastic compass box glinted.

Sherret found himself on his feet, yelling and waving.

“Drop that, damn you! Drop it, or by—”

He remembered his needle-pistol and grabbed it. His hands were shaking stupidly. He took a pot shot at the bird. The needle sang away far off target. The Tek-bird flapped by unconcernedly a hundred feet above him and headed out over the lake. He shot twice more, ineffectively.

Quite suddenly the bird went into a steep dive. It plunged like a gannet into the lake, taking the compass box with it. There was hardly a splash. The bird was a practiced diver.

Cursing, he waited for it to re-appear. It did not.

He continued to wait, pacing the limits of the small dry area. A tortured hour dragged by. The lake surface remained unbroken. Tek-birds, it seemed, nested under water. He supposed the compass box was tucked away down there together with sundry other shiny objects this sonic menace with the jackdaw instincts had collected.

Eventually he lost hope. The map was small loss. But the compass... Without it, he was disoriented. No stars could ever shine in Amara’s glowing skies. The positions of the Three Suns could offer little reliable guidance; the crazy path of the planet between them was only confusing.

Of course, he could return to the ship—and Maxton.

But Maxton wouldn’t give him another of the valuable compasses. In fact, Maxton might already have relinquished his rank—and the new captain might well deny Sherret his freedom.

To hell with Goffism. At the moment he knew what was roughly the right direction. He would push on and hope. After all, he might meet an occasional Jackie, or even a Paddy, who might deign to indicate the way.

He plodded around the lake to the western side and struck off on a line he remembered from the map.

The Jackie's queer warning kept going through his mind.

Beware of those who have only two, of those who become three, of that which becomes many.

Those who have only two what?

Who were those who became three? Three what?

As for that which became many... It could be almost anything, from fruit flies to the sorcerer's broomstick.

The whole rigmarole was as senseless as most of the Jackies' remarks—and yet seemed somehow different from the usual run. More typical of the usual run was a saying of the Jackies', "May you live until the slow burn eats its tail." He'd never been able to get that allusion. A "slow burn" was archaic English slang, but obviously there could be no connection.

Merely a kind of meaningless poetry? Speculation was dulled at last by the sheer muscular fatigue of endless plodding.

CHAPTER TWO



HE WALKED for hours, until his feet were sore, and then he walked some more and the soreness wore off. A pair of Jackies cackled at him, but gave him a wide berth.

He saw a high speck which might have been a Tek-bird, and he hid beneath a smooth-barked tree until the speck vanished. When he tried to move, he found his jacket was caught. The smooth bark had put forth a protuberance like the claw of a lobster. The pincers had met neatly through the hem and were as firm as steel.

He tore himself away. He felt in no mood to linger and experiment. A presentiment was forming that this journey was going to prove tougher than he'd ever imagined. He was content to leave this specimen for some future, and more leisured explorer to collect for his arboretum.

But he made a mental note not to sleep under any similar trees. Conceivably, that claw could close on a man's throat.

He slept instead on a small plateau of bare rock.

He awoke to a predominantly yellow sky and to a sense of confusion about direction. From his small perch he surveyed his surroundings. Far away on the world's verge was something peculiar. If it were a tree, it must be miles high, with a

translucent trunk and a great, fuzzy, dark mass of foliage.

Weighing things up, he decided that that must be the general direction of Na-Abiza. If he made for the treelike thing, it would at least keep him headed in a straight line. In strange territory, one tended to walk in a large circle.

He set off, walking quickly, and covered several miles. He was becoming aware of a distant mutter of thunder, as though a shooting war were in progress just over the horizon.

The peculiar object was even further away than it had seemed. Although it had grown taller and larger, he still couldn't make out what it was. The tree (to call it that) appeared to have grown from the ground at a windblown angle. The trunk glimmered with light.

Definitely, the thunder was coming from it—and loudly now.

Break for lunch. He squatted, chewing, regarding the enigma which remained so obstinately on the horizon. *Whee-smack!* He rolled away sideways, nearly choking with a mouthful of dry cracker.

Something, arriving with the velocity of a rocket, had smacked into the earth beside him.

Gingerly, he peered at it over his shoulder. It was a rod around eighteen inches long and an inch in diameter sticking vertically in the ground. It was such a pale yellow that he could see its color wasn't inherent, but reflection. In a white light, the object would be white.

It must have come from directly overhead. He looked up apprehensively. The sky was just an empty yellow desert.

The thing must have dropped from an immense height. Perhaps from space? It could have brained him. Was it intended to do so?

He gathered his courage, reached out and touched the rod gently. He'd anticipated it would be hot from air friction. Actually, it was unduly cold, almost icy. He tapped and felt it. It wasn't metal; it seemed more like stone. He wrenched it from the ground.

As he handled it, it became warmer and softer. It began to bend in the middle. Suddenly, it fell apart in his hands and the contents ran. He dropped the pieces with a cry of disgust. Bird lime wasn't anything unusual in itself. Neither was water vapor, which formed the ball-clouds in the sky. What kept fooling you on Amara were the shapes and the manner of presentation of basically familiar substances.

He used much of his drinking water in cleaning up. He'd lost all taste for his meal and left it.

Somewhere near the stratosphere, beyond view, some species of bird, obviously large from its droppings somehow maintained flight. Either there was a layer of dense air up there, formed by some meteorological support. He pictured a sort of winged gasbag.

Just another doodle, he told himself, and resumed the journey. For some time he kept discovering himself tending to cower in anticipation of further gifts from heaven.

Then he lost himself in wonder as he drew nearer the immense phenomenon that had looked tree-shaped.

It was no tree. It wasn't even solid. The fuzzy dark mass surmounting it was the biggest cloud ever—miles in diameter. Roughly globular, its edges were whirling mist. It was condensing on a great scale at the bottom, and the rain was pouring torrentially down at an angle in a concentrated stream, jetting onto the land. Yet the cloud maintained a uniform density. As fast as it lost water it absorbed more invisible moisture from the atmosphere.

Such perpetual clouds did exist on Earth, rare and isolated freaks in the southern hemisphere. But the confined path of the rain squirting from this one was peculiarly an Amaran phenomenon. There was a force at work here probably never before encountered by man.

The yellowy light shone through the jet, straight as a glass pipe, and clusters of air bubbles glinted in their swift, slanting passage.

The thunder was really heavy now, shock waves riding with the sound waves. The ground vibrated.

The cloud hung over the land like a foreshadowing of doomsday, but the brightly shimmering gold shaft sprang from it like a message of hope. A golden mist enfolded its base.

Sherret walked on into the mist. It was fine spray and soon soaked him. The tiny globules danced in the air to the organ roar of the rushing water. Presently he found himself at the lip of a valley. Its lower slopes plunged into a sea of heavy spray. They were steep; the valley was practically a canyon.

He followed the edge of it for a long way, until the mist thinned enough to give him a general picture. The cloud must have been spouting for an eternity. This deep valley had been worn into shape by hurtling water through innumerable centuries. It was dead straight and, canal-like, ruling a line to the horizon.

Sherret paused to consider. He had something more than two hundred and fifty miles yet to cover on the trek to Na-Abiza. This strange river was rushing pretty much in the direction he believed he must follow. If it kept headed that way, he might get a free ride.

If he had a boat... But Captain Maxton hadn't thought to supply one.

He went on his way thoughtfully. A few miles on the valley sides were a bit less precipitous. Down near the water's edge bushes had begun to make their appearance. Further along, they were bigger and sturdier; some of the branches were as thick as his wrist.

He picked his point, then made a careful way down to it. He slid here and there but didn't fall. The water glided past very fast over its smooth bed. It was hard to

judge its speed, for there were few ripples and no flotsam. About twenty miles an hour, maybe.

He dumped his rucksack on the narrow bank and tested his machete on a nearby bush. It chopped cleanly. The wood was hard and rather sapless. He began to cut reasonably straight lengths.

When he had sufficient planks laid out, he uncoiled the rope he'd brought and began binding them. The raft consumed it all save for a short length he kept for a painter. Yet it was quite a small raft.

He hunted along the bank for a really big bush, hewed off and trimmed its longest branch. It was to be his navigating pole.

After a meal, he prepared for the launching. He strapped his rucksack on his back again; he didn't want it swept away in any mishap. He pushed an edge of the raft into the water. It was nearly wrenched from him. He'd underestimated the speed of the torrent. It must be well over thirty miles an hour.

He checked the painter by which he'd moored the raft to a firm-rooted bush. He judged it would hold. Then, straining, he shoved the raft wholly into the water. It tugged like a wild dog on a leash. The bush was yanked, groaning, almost horizontal.

He clambered onto the raft, balanced himself, and turned to slice through the painter with the machete. The rope parted and the raft shot off down river with an acceleration that laid him flat on his back, feet in the air, his navigating pole across his chest.

He tried to hold on to everything at once—the pole, the machete, and the cordage of the raft. He could see the high walls of the valley sliding rapidly by. The air streamed over him. The yellow sky looked down at him blankly.

He laughed rather breathlessly, then squirmed around to bring himself onto his hands and knees. He took stock. It was all right. The raft was riding high, buoyantly, straight along the way, and there were no rocks in sight.

Satisfied, he settled himself more comfortably, prepared to accept whatever the mystery tour might bring.

After some hours, it had brought stiffness to his joints and very little variety. A fast, but dull trip. The biggest mystery, to his mind, was that he'd seen no signs of life beyond occasional birds. There had been several grassy shelves and banks wide enough to site a village. They were as deserted as the cliff tops. One would have imagined a fresh body of water like this would have some people dwelling alongside it. Admittedly, it couldn't be compared with, say, the Nile, because Amara was far from being a desert and there were plenty of lakes.

Yet, no single hut, nor even a lone being, in perhaps a hundred and fifty miles along a direct line.

He found himself hoping pretty hard that he *was* heading for Na-Abiza and human company. Right now he felt so isolated that the sight of even Captain Maxton wouldn't be unwelcome.

How far did this water course run? Should he regain the shore now or ride on for a few more hours? For all he knew, he could be riding to the brink of a waterfall roaring down into some great pit—the kind of surprise Amara liked to provide.

He hoped the river wouldn't do any such foolish thing. From the signs, it was hardly likely. It was losing its impetuosity. At first, he'd been forced to half close his eyes against the air stream. Now it scarcely ruffled his hair. The valley was steadily widening. Its slopes lost height as the water lost speed.

Greenness was stealing into the sky as Amara slowly turned this hemisphere towards Blue. There was still more of Yellow than Blue as yet, though, and the green was pale and cold and seemed to Sherret to emphasize his loneliness.

All right, he told himself, I'm a gregarious misanthrope. Not temperamentally a polar explorer nor a solitary mountaineer. Nor yet a chronic party-goer. It's just that I like to have someone around to exchange ideas with. Without some kind of human relationship I begin to feel lost, that nothing's really real.

The only test of one's actual existence is the response of another mind. Granted, in the ultimate analysis we're all only dream fragments.

All that we see or seem

Is but a dream within a dream.

All the same, the company of the crew of Bagshaw's *Pegasus*—he knew many of them—was becoming a need. If he were right about its direction, the river would carry him far faster to them than his feet would. He decided to stick with the raft a few hours longer.

In the event, the few hours became many. The river, which had sprung so eagerly from its unusual source, gradually lost spirit after the valley had dwindled away. Sluggishly, it spread itself thin over flat country and began to sink into the earth.

Seeing that the trip was coming to an end, Sherret had been trying to pole the raft to the nearer bank. It was exhausting work. The now muddy river bed clung hard to his pole, which finally stuck and snapped off.

The raft drifted and eventually became bogged down in thick ooze.

Sherret tried to make an assessment. It was hard to guess with any exactness how far he had come, especially as he'd dozed a couple of times on the raft. Perhaps some two hundred and fifty miles, all told. Which left something around fifty miles yet to go.

And the initial three miles looked like being the worst, for he was all of that distance from the bank. Three miles of dark, clinging mud.

He poked around with the remnant of the broken branch and ascertained that the ooze was on the average knee deep. He ate, rested, then lowered himself gently from the raft. When he moved, it was as though his legs were bound in wet sheets. His speed was perhaps a yard a minute. At that rate it would take eighty-eight hours to reach the bank—he worked it out during one of his frequent rests.

He plugged on grimly. As he progressed, the ooze must become shallower and the going firmer and his speed correspondingly faster. So long as he didn't step in a hole and be smothered to death.

The sky was bottle-green, and darkening.

An eternity later, a wet, slimy creature wriggled on its stomach from the last reaches of the mud swamp and weakly grasped grass tufts rooted in dry earth. It clung to them as though they symbolized everything that was most precious. Which they did—safety, an anchorage, rest.

The creature, which had once been an erect and confident human being, was now witless, drained of thought and almost of life. But it could still feel, though all it felt was pain. Every single leg muscle felt as though its fibers were torn to shreds by the thousands of fights to free the limb from sucking mud.

The mud had claimed boots and socks—and manhood, too. But a creature had survived.

The sky was turning an ominous purple.

In the deepest indigo light which Amara could produce, a man-creature was slumped, half-sitting, against the bole of a solitary fruit tree to which he had dragged himself. The fruit wasn't the attraction for he was beyond hunger. He was still following a blind instinct to clutch at firm roots.

The mud had caked hard on his face, though he was unaware of it. In his mind, he was still battling against liquid mud. His brain seemed choked with it. His thoughts moved with the greatest difficulty, too weak to link up.

Dully, he became aware of a faint and pale oblong somewhere in the near distance. Presently he began to concentrate on it, simply to establish a mental focal point again.

A house? But it seemed so insubstantial. Maybe it was a trick of this dim light, but the oblong looked filmy, semitransparent. A house of glass?

But who could have built a house of glass on Amara, where building was at a primitive level? So far as was known. That qualification must always be added; so little of Amara was known.

In a little while, when he had recovered some strength, he would go and investigate the pale shape.

Suddenly, there snapped into being, only a few yards away and plainly solid and real, another fruit tree. He stared at it. It seemed as firmly rooted as the one he reclined against.

Now his curiosity was engaged and his mind began to work of its own volition, albeit slowly. About a foot above his head there jutted a stubby little branch. If he could reach it and pull himself to his feet...

Somehow he did so, through a series of small deliberate movements. He had achieved the status of *pithecanthropus erectus*, at least, and might yet become a man again. He looked around him slowly—and then clung more tightly to the little branch.

For six more fruit trees, all exactly similar, had joined the other one, confronting him in a tight arc.

His brain whirled. Fear stirred in him. He knew he was in serious danger, yet couldn't define the threat. He had to get away from here.

He set his teeth and let go of the branch. He stood freely but swaying. Then two further trees created themselves soundlessly before him.

The fruit of all of these trees looked like black plums. In another light they could have been red. For no reason, he felt sure they were poisonous.

Beyond the trees the pale oblong glimmered indistinctly. The safety he'd sought so desperately didn't lie under this tree. But if he could reach the house...

More trees sprang from nowhere, between him and that possible sanctuary.

Steadily he was being hemmed in by a small, dense wood.

A vague memory of the fate of Macbeth floated into his mind. When Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane, it brought the prophesied doom with it.

He took a shaky pace forward. A tree leapt up in his path. He clung to it—to the seemingly identical branch he had just relinquished. He worked his way around the bole and tried to walk on.

Another tree barred his way and stopped him in his tracks.

Beware of that which becomes many.

What was the use of warnings whose meanings you learned only when it was too late?

These trees springing from nowhere had a purpose.

They were deliberately blocking his path to the house. For some reason they didn't want him to reach it. Okay, he would head away from the house, back along the margin of the swamp. He turned, intending to go that way.

Almost as if they'd read his mind, five more trees appeared like a palisade before him.

That made it clear that the trees didn't wish him to go any place at all. They were trying to draw a magic circle around him.

Wearily, he detached the machete from his belt and swung at the nearest tree. And again. A tiny chip went flying. He had merely nicked the tree. What little energy he had recovered began already to ebb. Felling the tree was far beyond him.

The trees were tall and clasped their branches closely to themselves in the manner of a poplar. He thought, so long as I stay close to the boles I'll always be able to sidle between them, however many trees there get to be, because their branches must keep them a little apart.

He turned again towards the house, intent upon trying his method.

Cr-runch. Two further trees arrived, their branches groaning and creaking as they intermeshed. Leaves and broken pieces fell about him.

This seemed to confirm that his thoughts were being read and his every intention consciously frustrated. A weak fury spurred him to try to shoulder his way between these two latest arrivals. It was impossible. The gap was too narrow.

He realized that even if he were physically fit, there could be no escape from the trap closing about him.

He lost his head, and made a series of wild dashes in different directions. The air was full of the sound of the cracking, clashing, and breaking of branches.

Arms flailing, he rebounded from bole after bole. When one arm was caught between a pair of them snapping into objectivity simultaneously, he cried aloud in fright and despair. If this mad multiplication continued, his lease of life was short; quite soon he would be crushed to death.

Sweating, he wrenched his arm free after a struggle. The effort burned away his last drop of energy. He collapsed from sheer weakness. The side of his head thumped hard against one of a compact circle of trees.

The purple world darkened into night.

CHAPTER THREE



SHERRET didn't believe in ghosts, but he had to believe in this one because he saw it. He knew it was a ghost because it was as transparent as lace and wore a shroud. Although he lay helpless before it, it didn't scare him because it was the ghost of a friendly and beautiful woman.

There was no color to her cheeks, eyes, or lips, but they conveyed expression clearly enough. The ghost was both concerned and hopeful. Obviously she was concerned about him. What she was hopeful about was less obvious.

She had a ghost of a voice—a sweet whisper. She spoke to him and he heard himself answering. But what either of them said, or in what language, he had no idea. It was a murmur of voices heard in the distance in an opium dream. He felt detached from them. Only one thing emerged clearly—her name was Rosala.

He was lying relaxed and at peace in a purple twilight.

Then she reached down and laid a finger on his shoulder. He couldn't feel the touch of it. He seemed unable to make any movement himself. Although he felt as though he were still reclining on his back, his body drifted gently upwards. He was floating on air, her finger still on his shoulder.

So he must be a ghost, too, and this must be the next world. It was strange, but not frightening. Indeed, it became amusing when Rosala began to push him along

through the air, still using only the one finger, as though he were some kind of human balloon.

They came to a garden which even in this murky light looked lovely. There were wide lawns, and flowers drained of brightness by the dim illumination, and an ornamental pool which seemed full of black ink. There were many statues at the pool's edge and spaced about the lawns. It looked odd. Some of them were plainly as substantial as marble, but the rest were as ghostly and tenuous as Rosala herself, and as the pale oblong they were now approaching, which was the side of a many-windowed house.

The main door was large, open, and flanked by a pair of indubitably solid sculptures of naked women, life-size and life-like. As he passed between them, he saw they both had the same face.

It was Rosala's.

Then he passed into a blinding white light and closed his eyes against the dazzle of it. Almost at once he fell asleep. He dreamed, and the dreams were confusing, but seemed very real while they lasted. Intermittently, there came patches of unconsciousness where there were no dreams.

He was always glad to emerge from them and find Rosala there. She was the one constant in a giddy flux. And so she remained unchanging—until he found he could change her.

Within the house she never wore the robe he'd naively assumed to be a shroud. She was as unadorned as her twin likenesses guarding the door. Her figure was well rounded and pleasing, but rather too full for his taste, like the Velasquez Venus.

Watching her, he let his imagination slim her somewhat at the waist and hips. And, lo, she became slimmer before his eyes. This was an exciting discovery, especially as it seemed far more vivid and real than the erotic fantasies of adolescence.

But he had disproportioned her. So then he had to reduce her bosom, then fine down her limbs to slim elegance.

Sculpturing in flesh was a fascinating occupation. She didn't seem to mind it in the least, and was always smiling at him and talking to him. They had long conversations. It was queer, but he was never able to recollect what they were about. Indeed, while they were in progress, he hardly knew what he was saying.

He was never conscious of eating or drinking, but he supposed he must be absorbing sustenance for he felt neither hunger nor thirst. Also, he supposed he must now be capable of movement, for he kept finding himself in different parts of the house, though he had no memory of having walked to them.

He had only a vague conception of the house. He knew it was extensive, and that the biggest room, where they spent most of the time, was a kind of studio. Paintings hung on the walls and stood on easels. There were several large blocks of stone, some partially carved.

Rosala was both painter and sculptress, yet he never saw her handle a brush or

chisel.

It was strange that he knew her name, but couldn't recall his own. He had a suspicion that this was because he hadn't a full title to a name. He wasn't a complete personality, only a detached fragment of one. The rest—the bulk—of him was elsewhere. Who, and where, was the real he? It was a puzzle without solution in a timeless, meaningless existence.

Until suddenly, at some dateless point and without the slightest warning, full consciousness struck him. There was a sunburst in his mind.

In the strong white light which permeated Rosala's house all objects at once became hard, brilliant, colorful, as though he were seeing them under the influence of mescaline.

He knew he was Alexander Sherret. He remembered clearly his adventures on the trek to Na-Abiza up to the point where he fell and crashed his head against something hard. After that, things remained hazy.

That part of him who had had long talks with Rosala was still absent, things in some blind alley of the memory. However, here he stood now in the center of the studio, in slippers and a blue velvety robe with a golden cord gathering in the waist. He felt vitally alive and strong. He walked across the glassy floor, which contained intertwining ribbons of colors, moving slowly like snakes, in its depths, to a wall mirror.

He looked well too, and had grown an impressive, rust-red beard. He fingered it, and touched more tenderly the still sore place above his right ear. A slight lump remained there.

A painting on an easel caught his attention. It sent a small shock of disquiet through him. In purple monochrome it stylistically displayed the pattern of a man trapped, grotesquely twisted and crushed amid a cluster of tall, smooth pillars. Although contorted in pain and fright, the face was recognizably his. The pillars, presumably, were simplified versions of the trees.

As he regarded it, unconsciously he began a new habit—a nervous tugging at his beard.

A pair of ivory-white, perfectly molded arms stole around his shoulders from behind. A honeyed voice whispered in his ear, in Amaran with an attractive, unfamiliar accent,

“Ah, my Ulysses, you said you never wanted to look at it again. But it fascinates you, doesn't it? Art is stronger than our fears or desires. Didn't I always tell you that?”

He disengaged himself and turned to look into Rosala's smiling eyes. They were his favorite shade of blue. She was an ash blonde; he had a weakness for the Scandinavian type.

He said in an undertone, “How could anyone so lovely as you create anything so horrible as that?”

She pouted childishly. “Create? I didn’t create it. An artist only receives and records impressions.”

“Art is selection, Rosala. You could have selected worthier impressions than these. This picture is stark, gloating sadism. You must be a cruel woman.”

She stared at him strangely. “You can believe that?”

“Well, I don’t know. I only know I loathe this painting.”

She took a deep breath. “Very well, you loathe my work,” she said, in a hard voice startlingly different from her former tone. She thrust past him and punched at the canvas with both fists. There was strength in those slim, smooth arms. They smashed the painting to a torn ruin.

She turned on him with an angrily flushed face.

“Perhaps you—” she began, but quite impulsively he seized her, hugged her, and smothered her with kisses. She didn’t resist. She returned his kisses with passion. He observed, belatedly and with wry amusement, that she was quite naked. From the assured and easy way he fondled her, it was apparent that this embrace had happened many times, that his muscles and nervous system remembered what he did not.

“Ulysses,” she murmured, now tender and full of love.

“Why do you call me Ulysses?”

She stood back, holding him at arm’s length, and looked searchingly at him.

“Darling, you are talking strangely. Something has happened. What is it? Have the bad dreams come back?”

“Bad dreams?”

“That painting which you called sadistic didn’t come from my mind, you know. Nor from reality. It originated in your imagination. But it was *our* picture—your conception, my execution. Together we were exorcising your bad dreams of the Melas tree. Once expressed externally, in paint, in art, we hoped they would cease to haunt you. You don’t remember that?”

“No, Rosala, I don’t remember. I don’t know what’s been happening to me for some time past—at least, not clearly. You’ll have to help me to fill in the gaps, the blotted out parts. Perhaps I’d better tell you what I *can* remember.”

She looked at him for a moment, then nodded, and pulled him gently to a nearby couch. They settled among cushions.

She watched him wonderingly while he told of the trek, the events which had led to it, the things seen through a glass darkly since he started wading ashore from the raft.

When he finished, she said, “As for me... It’s strange to have to tell you these things again. I’m Rosala—yes, that’s my real name. When I asked your name, you did not say ‘Sherret’” (she pronounced it “Sherry”) “but ‘Ulysses.’ And at first you

called me ‘Circe,’ I don’t know why. But later, ‘Rosala.’

“One day I was walking sadly in my house, knowing that neither it nor I had much longer to live. I was wondering how much time was left to me, whether it would be worth starting another painting. Or if, in fact, I could ever paint again. Then I looked out of the window and saw you being trapped by the Melas tree.

“Then you fell and lost your senses. So I went out and brought you here. I felt sorry for you. And sorry for the Melas tree, too, because I was depriving it of further companions. Still, it had done very well for itself from you. I was glad of that. The Melas tree and we Petrans have a bond of sympathy, something in common which distinguishes us from all other living creatures on Amara.”

Sherret raised an eyebrow, and she paused.

“However,” she resumed, “Melas trees can live together in a community. The one beyond my garden, by the river, was unfortunate. It was isolated. Now it isn’t any more. It’s become a community because by chance you came. But we Petrans can’t live with each other for long. We have nothing to give one another. We must live alone, and die alone, unless—”

She broke off, and stroked his arm gently. Almost possessively, Sherret thought, with a vague alarm.

“There aren’t many of us. We live near the river. And the Melas trees grow only by the river, too. Most Amaranans are afraid to come near us. Lee wasn’t afraid. He was a real man, although sometimes he lost confidence in himself.”

“Lee? Who was Lee?”

“He was the man who lived with me before you came.”

Sherret disengaged his arm and sat up straight. He frowned down at her. Her beautiful white body lay at careless ease upon the bright cushions. Her profile, partly his creation, with its high brow, straight nose, and firm little chin, was upturned as she gazed at the lofty and domed ceiling. Obviously, she was remembering Lee with affection.

Or perhaps with more than affection.

“You were *lovers*?” Sherret was surprised at the condemnatory note which rang through the last word. He’d never thought of himself as a puritan. Perhaps he had inherited a Calvinistic streak from his Scottish ancestors.

“But of course. I have loved all of the men who have lived with me.”

“Well, I’ll be damned! You promiscuous little baggage!”

Unfortunately, that phrase didn’t translate well into Amaran. The result implied cold, calculating infidelity.

She sat up abruptly and stared at him with wide, horrified eyes. Then she clawed at his face with both hands. The beard partly saved him but she scored two bad scratches under his eyes. The blood welled and dripped.

He swore, jumping to his feet and flinging her back on the couch. He dabbed at the wounds with the back of one hand.

“You’re a bad-tempered cat, aren’t you? You could make a man’s life a hell, I reckon. Is that why none of your men stayed around here with you? Or did you kill ’em all?”

Her eyes shone like blue fire.

She lifted an arm rigidly and pointed at him. Then it was as though a cannonball had hit him in the chest. He went flying onto his back on the glacial floor and slid for some feet over the slowly writhing shapes beneath it.

He lay still for some moments, whooping for breath. Then he sat up slowly, hands pressed to his sore breastbone. From the couch she regarded him, the fire of hate gone. She looked like a petulant, disappointed child. The strikingly blue eyes looked big and sad.

“You win,” said Sherret with a gasp. “Technical knockout. I didn’t... see it coming.” He managed a grin.

At once she ran over to him, knelt, held his head tightly against her warm body, rocking him gently. The blood from his cheek smeared her breasts. “Sherry, I’m really sorry. Oh, Sherry—”

“Forget it, pet. I said the wrong thing the wrong way.” She said, softly, “Only wicked Petrans live with more than one man at a time. I always had only the one. So I couldn’t be unfaithful.” Between kisses, she went on, “I loved them all... but only some of them loved me. Perhaps none of them did—for they all left me in the end. I think Lee loved me—and will come back to me— when he has proven himself.”

Sherret felt a stab of jealousy about Lee. He stood up, picked her up—she was surprisingly light—and carried her back to the couch.

He said, “You’re getting me in a whirl. I just don’t understand your way of life. I was angry with you because I love you, and I was jealous of those other men. Now you talk of Lee coming back. Is it him you want—or me?”

She made no answer. Instead, she ripped a piece of cloth from a cushion, licked it wet, and tenderly cleaned up his face. She ignored the daubs on her own flesh. He was amused by her method and touched by her concern. Even though he knew she would have done as much for Lee—and perhaps had done, if they had fought in the same way.

“Did you ever fight with Lee?” he asked, suddenly.

She avoided his gaze. “Yes.”

“Who won?”

“I lost,” she sighed. “For he left me.”

“But that was to prove himself, didn’t you say?”

“Yes. He had to. But he might have stayed with me if I hadn’t been so foolish. I

annoyed him so much sometimes that he tried to beat me.”

“But you wouldn’t let him. You knocked him down with your pocket thunderbolt, didn’t you? What are you—an electric eel?”

She didn’t understand the reference, and let it pass. “Yes, I was very foolish. He came here seeking self-respect, and I tried to help him—and I did, too. And then I would lose my temper and spoil everything, undo all I’d built up. Maybe he would have gone on his way eventually, all the same. He had a mission, you see. He said he must face the most dangerous creatures on this planet, stand up to them and survive. Only then, he said, would he be able to call himself a man.”

“What are these dangerous creatures?”

“They’re called the Three-people. I’ve never seen them and I never want to. They live in the pass between the mountains in the northwest. Only fools or heroes go there. The fools never return. The heroes return seldom—and when they do, they have become fools. They’ve lost their wits and rave wildly about the Three-people. But nothing they say makes any sense any more. Their minds have gone. Lee said he would come back to me. I think he meant to. But he has been gone a long time, far longer than it should take him to reach the mountains and return. So sometimes I fear he will never return. And sometimes I fear he will—as a poor crazy man.”

Sherret tugged at his beard absently.

“This planet of yours, Rosala, gets a bit too bizarre for me at times. I can’t get a clear picture of the place. I keep trying to piece it together, but nothing joins onto anything. I’m beginning to think the pieces aren’t meant to fit. They belong to different jigsaw puzzles. Melas trees and Petrans and Three-people... Have you ever heard the expression ‘Beware of those who become three’?”

“Yes, it’s a common saying. It relates to the Three-people.”

“But how do they become ‘three’?”

“I don’t know, Sherry. I don’t think anybody knows. But they are terrible monsters of some kind. It frightens me to think about them. Let us forget them. Let’s talk about—oh, the Melas trees.”

“It rather frightens *me* to think about them,” said Sherret, ruefully. “But all right, tell me about them.”

Long ago, she said, the Melas tree was a simple fruit-bearing tree which flourished in this part of the country in a perfectly normal way. The birds ate its fruit and carried its seeds far and wide.

Then the species was attacked by a blight which all but killed it off. Its fruit became poisonous; only the ignorant devoured it and died. The birds shunned it. Moreover, the seeds lost the vital reproductive power, except for the occasional throwback or sport. The lone tree near the house must have sprung from an odd exception of this kind. Maybe some creature carried the seed there, maybe at the cost of its life.

But Melas trees didn't give up that easily. They had a tremendously strong instinct for survival. Paradoxically, the disease caused a mutation which helped survival. All plants have a primitive awareness, not exactly a mind and certainly not intelligence. They are simply aware in a weakly telepathic way.

The disease caused some chemical change in the sap of the Melas tree which enormously increased the sensitivity of its awareness, its telepathic awareness.

"You mean, gave it reasoning power?" asked Sherret.

Rosala shook her head. The tree hadn't any reasoning power to begin with, so that couldn't be stimulated. It completely lacked hindsight or foresight. But it was aware that past and future states existed, because it was aware that humanoid creatures were conscious of them.

And quite unthinkingly it happened upon a way of using the humanoid brain as a medium for reproducing itself. *Literally* reproducing itself—not just producing seedlings.

For in the humanoid mind there was foreknowledge of the Melas tree's continued existence tomorrow. And tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow... In short, a Melas tree existing in thousands of future instants of time.

The Melas tree, able to live only in the present, but aware of this picture in the humanoid mind, conceived these multitudinous future states of itself as *separate other trees*, all existing in the same instant—somewhere. Instinctively, it sought to contact its own kind, and reproduce.

And contact it did, through any humanoid mind which came within its sphere of influence. This sphere extended only to the reach of its branches. Any humanoid who strayed under them became a victim.

Even so, the tree's control was limited. If the humanoid was contemplating the past or present or was unconscious, it was useless to the tree. For the past was unalterable, the present couldn't be duplicated, and an unconscious mind couldn't be contacted. Only the future was malleable.

Once the humanoid mind became forward-looking, extrapolating into the future, even if for a distance of only a few moments, the tree would reach through, contact its future self and snatch it into the present.

"For Pete's sake, *how*?" asked Sherret.

"Nobody knows."

"Then how do you know all this other stuff about the Melas tree?"

"I was told." She added, archly, "Some very wise men have stayed under this roof."

"H'm. A lot of supposition, but some of it is probably true. Certainly, every time I contemplated making a movement, or a sequence of movements, a tree materialized—sometimes in batches. You can't make a movement without thinking about it first, however fleetingly. But did they have to keep barring my way?"

“Of course, darling. They didn’t want you to escape until they’d used your mind to the limit.”

“But they were trying to crush me to death.”

His voice became tight, constricted, and at the word “death” broke on an off-key note. It was as though invisible hands were throttling him. The room seemed to darken, as though the shadow of death had fallen upon it.

CHAPTER FOUR



THE BLACK CLOUD passing across his mind lasted maybe only seconds, but it left him gasping.

Rosala was watching him concernedly. When he could breathe again, she said, quietly, “You and I, Sherry, we’re both much too frightened of death.”

He wiped his damp forehead, and muttered, “I’m not afraid of death, but sometimes I’m afraid of dying.”

“For me, it’s the other way about. I’m not frightened of dying, but I’m really afraid of being—*nothing*. Of becoming non-existent. Once a Petran fades altogether, there’s no returning. And just before you came, I very nearly died.”

A short silence. Then Sherret said, “I don’t understand. Perhaps we’re not talking about quite the same thing. You’re still a mystery to me, Rosala. I know I love you. That’s all I really know about you. You know far more about me.”

“Yes, Sherry, that’s true. I know things about you that you don’t even know yourself—your unconscious fears and conflicts. When you were ill and delirious, I tried to help you externalize some of the bad things which were living in your mind like parasites. The strongest of them was a terror of being trapped in a small space and there strangled to death.”

He stared at her, the choking sensation returning.

“You feel it now? Then we failed. ‘Difficult Birth’ failed.”

“Difficult what?”

She sighed. “It was the title we gave our symbolic painting. You seemed to understand it then. Your fear of confined spaces and strangulation was born when you were born. Obviously, something went wrong. Possibly the umbilical cord was twisted around your neck. You were nearly suffocated to death.”

Nervously, he rubbed his neck, but he was interested. “That could be so. And when the Melas trees closed in around me, trying to kill me—”

“No, they weren’t trying to kill you. Only capture you. They were trying to form a stockade around you.”

“I see. But eventually I should have starved to death.”

“Yes, I’m afraid so. That’s what usually happens. But by then you would have helped to create a whole forest of Melas trees.”

“Well, that’s quite a consolation. How did you manage to save me, Rosala?”

“Partly you saved yourself, by becoming unconscious. They could no longer enter your mind, and therefore couldn’t complete the barrier around you. So I was able to reach you and get you out.”

“I owe you plenty for that. But to get at me, you must have walked beneath their branches. Yet, apparently, they didn’t attempt to hook you. Are you immune from their influence?”

Rosala bit her lip, and was silent for a moment.

Then she said, quietly, “At that time I was in no condition to be of use to them. I scarcely existed. I was a shadow.”

Sherret glanced at her sharply.

“Then I didn’t dream that part of it. I thought you were a ghost. You were transparent...”

He gripped her arm. It was as solid as his own.

“Yet now—” he began, but she clung suddenly to him, sobbing, “Sherry, don’t ever leave me. Please. Stay with me. Believe in me. Stay with me.”

He was surprised, but her intensity touched him. He put his arm about her and stroked her soft, bright hair. He wanted to reassure her, and the words which came automatically were tired old cliché.

“Don’t worry about it, darling. I love you. We’ll always be together after this.”

He meant it sincerely enough.

“But you said you had to go on—to Na-Abiza. You said you were Ulysses, and I was the enchantress, Circe, holding you here against your will...”

“Remember, dear, I was delirious. I didn’t know what I was saying.”

She looked up at him hopefully, with tear-wet eyes.

“Yes, you were ill,” she said, eagerly. “You kept having nightmares about the Melas tree, painting that awful picture in your mind. After this, we shall paint only lovely pictures, Sherry. We shall create such *wonderful* things. My mind has the power to change material things and remold them. And I can let your imagination join onto mine and work through my mind. Together we shall design and build and make our dreams reality. For you and I, we are *artists*.”

She emphasized the word, proudly. “Much of this work was created through the minds of men working in unison with mine,” she went on. “And the garden—”

“And you,” Sherret broke in, astonished. “I remolded you, in dreams, I thought. Are you telling me that actually happened?”

“I desired only that my appearance pleased you,” she murmured.

“And you will stay that way—you won’t fade into a ghost again?”

He felt her tremble.

“As long as you wish me here as I am, so long shall I be here.”

“Of all the mysterious things on Amara, you are the most mysterious, Rosala. Of course I wish you here, and just as you are. But does your existence depend only on my wish?”

She made no answer for a while, resting her head on his shoulder.

Then, in a small and muffled voice, “Petrens do not believe in themselves, as persons. They think of themselves as mirrors, only reflecting the real people. They can exist only through the belief of the real people, the people who have faith. Then they *seem* real, even to themselves... and everything in the universe is only a seeming. Even you, Sherry. But you real people can live together, because you believe. We Petrens can’t—we can’t support each other by faith. If we try, we die to nothing. We sympathize with the Melas trees, because we are like them; we can survive only through the minds of others.” He held her protectively, but his mind was spinning.

These Amaran frames of reference, outside all of his experience, might end by driving him off his head. They had already caused him one breakdown.

Only connect. Only adjust. But the group of associated memories and reflexes forming a personality called “Sherret” hadn’t been all that stable, to begin with. It was rent with conflicts. Under the continued stress of trying to comprehend the incomprehensible, it could well begin to break up, become schizophrenic.

And “Sherret” would be no more than a loose group of nameless and aimless dreamers wandering in a fog of amnesia.

He said, “I need you, Rosala, quite as much as you need me.”

She gave a little sigh of happiness, then pressed her lips warmly to his. As they kissed, a fragment of conversation echoed somewhere in his memory.

“... Have you ever been to Na-Abiza?”

“Yes, I have, human, but I didn’t get there.”

So this was where the trek to Na-Abiza ended.

The sky shaded from color to color, and sometimes they sat in the garden and watched it. Sometimes it ran through its chromatic scale unseen and unheeded, for they remained in the house for long periods—working, talking, laughing, making love. Also—perhaps too often—quarreling.

And Sherret learned to accept the incredible. On the face of it, a mature doctrine, but occasionally he had misgivings. It could lead to a dulling of the sense of wonder. Excess of anything tended toward boredom—even, strangely enough, excess of novelty.

There was plenty of novelty.

Just to watch Rosala paint involved a series of surprises. She needed no brush. She painted with her fingers.

She would set a canvas on its back, pour quantities of colors onto it, and let them ooze sluggishly together. Then she'd run her fingers lightly over the mess, mixing, separating, arranging with hair-line delicacy. It was as though each nerve-end at her finger tips was working independently on its own contribution to the overall design.

Not a speck of paint adhered to her fingers.

Sherret questioned her about this exquisitely controllable force flowing from her. She couldn't enlighten him about its nature. All Petrans had the power at birth.

"Birth?" Sherret echoed. "I've been wondering about that, too. How do Petrans get to be born if they never cohabit?"

Rosala said seriously, "There are some questions you mustn't ask, darling. We're a parasitic race and therefore vulnerable. To protect ourselves we're sworn to a code of secrecy about certain fundamental matters. But I'll tell you this much. You and I could have children."

"Petrans?"

"You might as well ask 'boys or girls?' We shouldn't know until they were born."

He fingered his beard. "Have you any children?"

"No, Sherry."

"Somehow, I'm glad. Another thing—are you sworn not to reveal your age?"

"Bodily, I'm as young or old as you wish me to be. And mental time is merely relative. Relatively, time is not the same on this planet as on Earth," she answered evasively.

"Oh, for Pete's sake, I'm not trying to pry. I'm only trying to learn where I stand."

"You stand on your own feet, as you told Captain Maxton. Darling, why do you keep trying to formalize everything? You must get Reparism out of your system. It can never work on Amara. Inflexible things only get broken here."

Another row was in danger of brewing. He thought it best to keep quiet. But his silence became sullen.

She sensed that, and her uncertain temper began to simmer. She started to work it off on a large block of granite-like stone. She attacked it with her bare hands, furiously pulling away chunks as though it were wax, indenting it with a finger-thrust, engraving it with a fingernail. It began to take shape but, obviously, from her expression, the wrong shape.

Suddenly her temper boiled over. The whole massive block went hurtling to the far wall. The crash made the house shake. Hung paintings came toppling to the

glassy floor.

“Think I’ll go for a stroll,” said Sherret, with forced calm. Inwardly, he was shaking. In one of her blind rages, Rosala could as easily smash him against a wall.

After the house, the garden was a haven of peace in the subdued green daylight. Rosala never painted by the light of the Three Suns because they were never together in the sky. But in the house she drew their light together by some optical wizardry and fused them into the glaring white light she demanded for her work.

Sherret, chewing on a B-stick, roamed along the edge of the pool. Recently he’d noted that the diving plinth was subsiding. He planned a minor engineering job to reset the thing. When he mentioned it to Rosala, she laughed.

“Sherry, it’s so easy!”

She lifted the weighty plinth with a finger, then rearranged its foundations with little more than a wave of the hand.

He applauded, but inside there was an empty feeling. His project had collapsed, his general sense of purpose was weakened. He’d always thought of himself as good with his hands. Now they seemed like clumsy paws. He’d always been able to take care of himself in a brawl. Now a woman could twist him almost literally around her little finger.

He loved her, no doubt of it. But one thing was becoming painfully clear; so long as he continued to live with her he would find it increasingly difficult to live with himself.

He reckoned he wasn’t the only man who’d paced these garden walks feeling this way. He felt a certain sympathy for Lee.

He looked at the distant mountains and wondered how Lee had fared on his quest. He’d had time to reach them—and return. Plenty of time. Why, then, hadn’t he returned?

Dead? Mad? Or hadn’t he really meant to return to Rosala?

Suppose he did return, now, a conqueror? What then? Where would he, Sherret, fit in? Or would he? Rosala had never forsworn her love for Lee.

“The hell with it—I’d leave them to it!” he exclaimed, aloud.

He was surprised by his own vehemence. Am I looking for an excuse to get away? he asked himself. The adventurer being hampered by the clinging woman, Ulysses and Circe? He still wanted Rosala—yet he still wanted to be free to wander on. She was love and security. Also—a trap.

It was the trap fear again. He recalled the trees which put out claws to grab him, the grass that clung about his ankles and tried to pull him down. He loathed their insistent attentions.

Impulsively, he went back indoors, intending to have it out with her. He found her all contrition and tenderness, and his resolve melted. If only he didn’t love her so much...

They became very close again.

And later, more clashes of temperament. His lone walks in the garden became longer. One purple day he found himself standing at the edge of the grove of Melas trees, daring himself like a schoolboy to dart in and out, just out of reach of their branches.

He began to understand why Lee had gone to prove himself.

Why wasn't it enough that Rosala was dependent on them for her very existence? It should have given them a sense of mastery. So far as he was concerned, it didn't. There was even a mean sense of resentment; he was being used by a—well, parasite was the word she'd chosen.

Again, he'd grown up under Reparism. Reparism said that the male was the accepted master of the household. Reparism said that there was a place for all persons, and that all must know their place.

Rosala just wouldn't stay put any place.

To live contentedly with her, he felt that there must be something that he could do which she couldn't do better. But why should he be forced to prove himself? In Na-Abiza, he could merely step back into his place in the Reparist system, and be respected for what he was.

He turned his back on the Melas trees and walked back to the garden pool. That statuary stood solidly around him. There was more of it now—some of his own design, but fashioned through Rosala's peculiar power and therefore not wholly satisfying. It was as if teacher had helped him.

Yet he knew that if he were to leave Rosala, that work which had emanated originally from his mind would endure. As had the work of Lee and of other men. But all that which was solely of Rosala's design, including the house itself, would very gradually fade to nothing as the designer lost belief in her own existence.

Could he do that to her? Was Wilde right? Did each man have to kill the thing he loved?

Yet she might not necessarily cease to exist. Many men had come this way before him. More were likely to come after him and give her full life again.

But he knew—and now tried desperately not to know—that there was a point of no return. If Rosala did fade to complete non-existence, then it would be as if she had never lived. And then if all the men in her life came back to this garden and called aloud for her, they would be crying for the moon. She had told him that.

No, he couldn't risk doing that to her. Yet by remaining he was condemning himself to at least a partial death. The suffocating sensation came on him again. There was no way out.

After the sickness had passed, he slouched depressedly back to the studio.

She flung herself at him. "Sherry, dear! Oh, what a fool I am!"

He held her tightly, knowing that he was more of a fool in saying what he was

going to say, because he knew the answer and the attempt was futile. But hope is always irrational.

“Forget it, Rosala. But we can’t go on like this, tearing ourselves to pieces. This place is a kind of prison for both of us. Let’s break out and go to Na-Abiza. There are men like myself there actively learning, exploring, planning, doing a job in life. Let’s join them. We’ll still go on with art, but you must understand that although I believe art is vital it’s still not the whole of existence for me. I have to express myself in my own way, too.”

She went very still in his arms. Then she said, tensely, “But I told you. Each Petran is bom to his or her own area. We are not permitted to leave it. It’s the law.”

“Break it, then. Is it so inflexible? You yourself said inflexible things only get broken here.”

“Sherry, you don’t know what you’re saying. It would mean the end of me.”

“In what way?”

“I can’t tell you. We are forbidden to speak of these things.”

“Did you speak of them to Lee?”

“No. Nor to any man.”

“Supposing Lee came back for you?”

“I still couldn’t go away with him. He would have to remain here.”

“What do you mean by that? What about me?”

“I’m sorry, Sherry, but you would have to go. As I told you, I can live with only one man at a time. Lee was here before you. He would take precedence. It’s the law.”

“Obviously you think more of your precious law and of Lee than you do of me. Well, that settles it. I shan’t stay around just waiting to be thrown out. I’m walking out— now.”

He thrust her aside and walked away.

“Sherry, Sherry, please, you can’t...”

Over his shoulder he said brutally, “Don’t worry—I shan’t leave you to die. I’ll find dear old Lee and send him back to you, and you can live happily ever after— under your idiotic law. And if Lee turns out to be dead, I’ll find you another sucker and send him along.”

He chose some stout shoes from the many they’d made together. The barefoot life was over. While he gathered his other belongings, she hovered around him like a persistent fly, importuning, poignant. He steeled himself to ignore her. He walked out into the garden for the last time, hard-faced. Yet there was inward shame; he knew he’d forced this particular quarrel and the issue.

He left her crying at the door, between the two naked effigies of herself in her more full-figured days. Lee had created those, through her, to his taste. Sherret

realized now how much he had unconsciously resented that.

He walked grimly along the path leading out of the garden. Momentarily, he was expecting a pulverizing blow between the shoulder blades hurled at him in anger and despair.

But it never came.

And so he resumed the trek to Na-Abiza, a free man again. He knew that the path led to the northwest, through the mountain pass where Lee might still be, living or dead. And where the Three-people were.

If Lee could face the Three-people, then so could he. It was something Rosala had admitted she would not care to do. It would show her the stuff he was made of.

He walked at a furious pace. Maybe this energy was generated by the feeling of sudden release. He tried to believe that. Maybe he was trying to put enough distance between himself and Rosala to weaken the temptation to return to her. He tried not to believe that.

There was little in the landscape to divert his attention. The distant foothills were darker than the mountains and appeared to be wooded. Between him and them, however, stretched leagues of flat and mostly barren land.

Small chance of meeting anyone on the way. Rosala had explained why the river country was neither popular nor populous.

Under a cloudless, burning orange sky he marched until he was lurching with fatigue. He rested, then set off again. At last he reached the first slopes of the foothills when Red reigned supreme and all the world was drenched in a crimson sunset glow.

It made the woods look black and sinister indeed, and by now he had become wary of trees of any kind. He camped some distance from the woods and slept again. He awakened to see the high frosted peaks looking like pale green icebergs afloat on the smooth, greener ocean of the sky.

The sky-sea ran down into a V-shaped bay—the pass, and the gateway to Na-Abiza. He made his way up the slopes towards it. The woods closed around him. The trees were all unfamiliar types, hung with blossom, and in this cooler light they looked not so much threatening as indifferent. All the same, he remained cautious.

The undergrowth was so thick in parts that he had to do heavy work with the machete.

Steadily, he climbed higher.

After several hours, every arm and leg muscle was aching. There was another worsening ache, also—for Rosala. Perhaps rest and time would cure it, too.

He was looking around for a likely clearing to camp in, when he came across some further Amaran phenomena.

There was a dead tree split neatly down the middle, its two halves leaning apart.

Struck by lightning, he thought. But the split was unusually clean. It was as though some giant, seeking firewood, had taken a swipe at it with a razor-edge axe, then left it.

Then he noticed several other trees had been sliced, all cleanly but not all down the center. Some of the trees had fallen clear apart. Others merely had boughs lopped off. The giant hadn't bothered to collect any of the kindling; the ground was cluttered with branches of all sizes.

Some of the cuts were obviously old and new twigs were sprouting from the stumps. Others were so recent that the oozing sap was still sticky.

He shrugged, and continued his ever-slowng climb. Very soon he came upon what he was looking for—a wide clearing, open to the sky. He wasn't going to sleep under any trees. He spread his waterproof and tried to get comfortable.

It was chilly at this altitude. Moreover, a cold north wind was pouring steadily through the mountain pass and there was no escaping it.

He swore, trudged back down the slope, returned with a load of the smaller chopped branches. He built and lit a fire, rigged the waterproof on a couple of branches to form a screen against the wind, and settled down between it and the fire.

He rested and ate. Life became tolerable. He yawned and lay back. Sleep came fast, and with it dreams.

Dreams of Earth, of deep space and the stars, of a garden crowded with statues of Rosala. The dreams took a nightmarish turn. The Melas trees were all around him again, and he had no strength to run and no breath to scream.

Then, smashing among the trees, snapping off branches right and left, stamping with feet of steel, came a giant. A blood-drinking ogre from long ago, frightening nursery nights, all teeth, staring eyes, and black hair, crying as he came, ridiculously yet chillingly,

Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum.

For my wood I come.

The ground shook under the nearing feet, and Sherret quivered with it, a terror-stricken child again.

Thump. Thump. THUMP.

At the last and heaviest thump, Sherret started awake and stared around, wild-eyed. Beneath a tree at the very edge of the clearing a massive branch was rocking gently on the scanty grass. It had just fallen, and had been amputated neatly at a crotch.

He sat rigid, watching it. It rocked itself to stillness. Now nothing was stirring anywhere. There was dead silence in the woods.

He must have slept long, for the light had changed and all things were blue-washed.

Cautious and trembling, he got to his feet, peering all around the clearing. He didn't know what he was looking for, but he felt that something was there. Belatedly, it occurred to him that he'd seen neither animal nor bird in the woods. Did they shun the woods because they knew they were dangerous to life?

Was something hiding behind the trees, watching him covertly? Yet, if the something had sliced these trees as though they were carrots, it must be huge. Too huge to be able to conceal itself behind any tree.

Something invisible, then? A monstrous vandal, mutilating senselessly? But anything of that size must surely have left its tracks on the ground, even if it were itself invisible. He had noticed no tracks.

He stuck a B-stick between his teeth, gripped his machete and tip-toed over to the fallen branch. Beyond it, among the trees, he saw other newly severed branches, mostly large, recently fallen. His dreaming mind had interpreted the impacts of their landing as the thumps of approaching feet.

That realization was a relief. He began to clutch at straws. Probably the monster was all imagination. Could be the trees had some disease which caused them to rot and fall apart in this peculiar manner.

But could this happen to a number of individual trees almost simultaneously? The odds were against that.

Common sense told him to waste no more time in speculation, but to get to hell out of the woods. He went back to the still smoldering fire, gathered his things, shrugged on his rucksack. Then he quitted the clearing, intent on making for the pass.

He'd gone maybe fifty yards when from close behind him came Thump. Thump. Thump.

And the swishing of leafy boughs and the crackle of breaking twigs.

He spun around.

A great invisible knife was stalking him, blazing its trail as it came—literally. Slices of bark were falling from the trees as it cut its way after him, and, emphatically, whole major limbs. These evidences showed it was pursuing an implacably straight line—that was aimed directly at Sherret.

Frozen, he watched it. The very evenness of its pace was unnerving. It threatened an inevitable doom, as though the unseen wielder of the knife were thinking, "Run if you like. Run till you drop, But I shall catch up with you... in my own good time."

A tree just in front of him, not twenty feet away, was suddenly completely bisected. The halves fell apart and crashed.

He came to life with a yell of alarm and leaped aside. There was a rapid blur of movement and a row of saplings beyond the tree were simultaneously uprooted and flung down.

What had moved? It had been lightning quick. In the dull blue light of these

shadowy woods, it had been impossible to discern a definite form.

Now it was a totally invisible again.

Sherret gulped, turned, and ran.

And met it approaching from the opposite direction. Thump, thump, thump went the slices of tree-wood, falling steadily along the new path towards him.

He slid to a halt. "Oh, God!"

He flung himself around, and began to run back. Almost immediately, there it was again, dead ahead, cutting its ruthless path to meet him.

Groaning with fear, he stopped, then looked wildly back over his shoulder.

The menace he'd fled was still behind him, still slashing its way after him. There were *tioo* invisible knives, closing on him inexorably from opposite directions. It was as though he were caught between the blades of immense shears.

Panic scattered his senses. He heard someone shouting, but was so confused that he didn't know whether it was himself or another. He began swinging the machete around him, slashing madly at the seemingly empty air, blindly on the defensive.

Somewhere a shout sounded again.

Then his machete jarred against one or other of the closing knife-edges with a flat, dull sound, as if he were hitting stone. The shock all but jolted it from his grasp. A thin crack appeared in the blade.

There came a rush of feet and a loud clang behind him. A powerful arm caught his shoulder and shoved him headlong into the undergrowth. Dazed, he scrambled for a few yards on hands and knees, then looked back. The spectacle was quite fantastic.

Two enormous shapes, each as wide as a house and tall as the tallest tree in the woods, seemed to be attempting to make physical contact with each other. They were curiously flat-looking, resembling a cross section of a sponge.

Between them a tall, naked man, muscled like a gymnast, danced a ballet of defiance. He bore a crusader-type shield, thin as pasteboard and glimmering faintly in the blue underwater light. Deftly, he kept the shapes apart, slamming alternately at each of them with the shield. It rang like a gong at every blow.

Amazingly, the two shapes backed slowly away from him. They began to sink into the ground.

The man laughed harshly, then came bounding towards Sherret.

"Get up, you poor fool!" he exclaimed in Amaran. "Do you want to be sliced up for a Creedo's dinner? Follow me."

He leaped lightly past. Sherret picked himself up, annoyed and ashamed. He resented the other's contemptuous tone, and was ashamed of his resentment. After all, the man had saved his life. With mixed feelings, he blundered along a path made easy for him by this stranger smashing down the undergrowth with his shield.

The man was burning up energy at fourfold Sherret's rate. But it was Sherret who first began to gasp for breath, with slack, hanging jaw. At last, after a mile of zig-zagging among trees across sloping ground, he swallowed his pride and grunted, "Wait for me."

The man waited for him to catch up. He was a handsome imperious brute.

"Do you want me to carry you?" he sneered.

Sherret drew whooping breaths, then complained, "Easy for you to talk. You're not carrying a load on your back."

He jerked a thumb at the bulging rucksack.

The man looked at him reflectively.

"Hold that for a moment," he said suddenly, and proffered the thin shield. Sherret took it automatically. The totally unexpected weight of it dragged him to the ground. The man laughed booming.

Sherret sat on the shield and wiped sweat from his face. Then he smiled wryly. "You're an objectionable bighead, but let's face it, you do have something to be conceited about. Thanks for getting me out of that jam, anyhow. Any chance of those perambulating guillotines catching up with us?"

"You mean the Creedos? Don't worry about them. Take it easy. As long as you're sitting on the shield, you'll be safe enough."

"How d'you mean?"

"They've gone underground. They may still be after us or they may not. But they could suddenly surface here. It's a favorite trick of theirs to attack from below, when you can't see them coming. That way, they could finish me. But the shield would save you; they can't cut through it."

"H'm," said Sherret, and studied the big man curiously. His face was as striking as his magnificent body. He, too, was bearded, but by comparison Sherret's beard was a limp wisp. Color was always difficult to name precisely in the changing light of Amara but this man's beard seemed jet black and thrust itself from his chin like a rock spur. His nose was equally forceful; he looked the most imperious of Caesars. His eyes were like Rosala's in her stormiest mood. Power radiated from him.

Shakespeare's lines came to mind.

"Nature might stand up,

And say to all the world, 'This was a man.' "

Other memories and comparisons came to mind also, and gave Sherret no comfort.

"What's your name?" he asked flatly.

"Lee-Gaunt-Lias-Nolla. You may have heard of me."

"I have." Sherret felt spiritless. He got to his feet, looking down at the shield.

Shakespeare had another apt comment. “The seven-fold shield of Ajax cannot keep

The battery from my heart.”

“I think we have some matters to discuss,” said Sherret, “in another part of the forest. Not here.” Lee picked up the shield easily with one hand. “I know a place. Come.”

CHAPTER FIVE



AS SHERRET followed Lee through the woods, he found himself accepting second place as a matter of course. Lee was a natural leader, and in a Reparist system would hold office as such. And he would laugh Goffism to scorn.

Soon they came to a fair-sized stream gurgling down from the mountains. To Sherret’s surprise, Lee walked into it and, knee-deep, began plowing upstream. Sherret shrugged, then followed the leader.

“No hurry now, and no danger,” said Lee carelessly. “The Creedos can drink only sparingly. Liquid in any quantity—especially fast running water—tends to choke them. They dare not rise through this stream which will lead us clear of the wood belt.”

It was a hard slog uphill against the current, but Sherret set his teeth and endured. At long last the woods thinned, and they emerged on the bare upper slopes. Lee splashed his way to the bank. Relievedly, Sherret joined him on dry ground. The pass was clearly visible now, directly ahead.

“My present home is just at the mouth there,” said Lee, pointing. “A quite cozy cave. Think you can make it or want to rest awhile first?”

“I can make it,” said Sherret grimly.

He did, but his legs were trembling with strain. Almost drained of strength, he flung himself down inside, on a pile of brush. Even Lee seemed glad to rest now. He laid the shield between them and reclined at full length.

Presently, Sherret revived enough to examine the shield curiously.

He said, “We use a metal something like this on our planet. The molecules are gradually compressed by an artificial magnetic field. It takes years to prepare. We employ it as a cutting tool to shear through the hardest materials. I didn’t realize Amaran science was this far advanced.”

“You’re one of the Earthmen, aren’t you?” said Lee, idly regarding the low-hanging roof. “I’ve heard about you. An effete species, by all accounts. You’ve some shocks coming your way on this planet, my friend. You landed on the barbaric side of Amara. You haven’t contacted any real civilization yet. Don’t imagine you go unwatched. My people have long-range instruments. They could kill you Earthmen

without stirring more than a finger, if they chose. But they're tolerant. The variety of life on Amara teaches one to be tolerant. They won't harm you so long as you don't do anything foolish."

"Such as?"

"Trying to force your way of life on them, for instance. Accept a hint, friend. Confine your attentions to the barbarians."

"To the Three-people, say?"

Lee looked at him sharply. There was a pause. Then Lee said, almost in a whisper, "Stay away from them... if you want to live."

"They live somewhere in these parts, don't they?"

"Yes—down the valley. You can see them from here."

"I'd be interested to take a look at them. You know, somebody warned me to beware of those who have only two, of those who become three—"

"Of that which becomes many," Lee finished for him. "Well, I've warned you again to beware of those who become three. Heed me. They are much more dangerous than those who have only two—and you've just learned by experience to beware of them."

"The Creedos? What do they have only two of?"

"They have only two dimensions, so the barbarians assume. Strictly speaking, that's not quite so. They have three dimensions. But their thickness is almost non-existent. When they present themselves edge on—and they always try to—in a poorish light you just can't see them. But they can see you. They have hundreds of microscopic eyes all over their body—some along the edges. Hundreds of mouths, too—far larger mouths. Greedy, ever-hungry mouths. They live mostly on the juices of vegetation, but they especially relish a drop of animal blood, if they can find it, which isn't often."

Sherret licked his lips, which had become dry.

"I presume their feeding technique is to slice through you, sucking in blood as they pass?"

"That's it—just as they absorb the sap in trees or the juice in roots. They spend most of their time browsing on roots just below ground. But sometimes they surface in patches of rich vegetation, particularly forests—for a change of diet."

"But, damn it, Lee, surely their internal organs must be too narrow to allow moisture to flow?"

"Why so? How thick is the average tree-leaf? And they're not even as complicated as a leaf. They're not thinking animals; they're as simple as a sponge. The difference is that by a quirk of nature the organic matter of their bodies has been compressed much as the inorganic matter of this shield has been compressed. That doesn't lessen their mass, and it increases their rigidity. It makes them one enormous, terribly sharp cutting edge. Of course, their flanks are vulnerable, to

modern weapons. But they won't let you get at their flanks; they swing around, like lightning, keeping themselves edge on."

"How do they do that? How do they move at all? They don't seem to have legs."

"Frankly, Earthman, I don't know. As a boy, I assumed it was some inborn faculty of balance. It is, I suppose, but it also makes use of the lines of force in the gravitational field of the Three Suns. Now that *is* complicated—too much so for my kind of mind. I'm no physicist."

"I guess they're quite a doodle. Not quite up to the Melas tree standard, though."

"Ah—that which becomes many. So you've encountered the Melas tree, Earthman?"

"Yes. We've met. I've yet to make the acquaintance of those who become three. Have you met any Three-people yet?"

It was a leading question, and Sherret tried to make it sound casual.

Lee made no answer. He brooded. Presently, he said, "Maybe I should never have met *you*, Earthman. I could have avoided it. Looking down from here, I saw the smoke of your fire. I wondered what kind of fool would camp in the woods where the Creedos roam. I went down there to save you from your ignorance or your own folly. Maybe I should have left you to them."

"Why? Merely because I ask awkward questions?"

Lee regarded him thoughtfully. "You've come from the south. Meet anyone on the way?"

"One or two crazy birds, a few crazy creatures. I'm on my way to Na-Abiza."

"You know whom I mean."

"Yes, Lee, I met Rosala. She, too, saved my life. I make a habit of going around getting my life saved. Only now I'm beginning to wonder whether it's worth saving. But I was grateful at the time. I lived with her for a spell. Then I left her. I know why you came here. I guess I came for a pretty similar reason. But there's another reason, too—I wanted to tell you to go back to Rosala. She still loves you, and she needs you desperately."

"What about you, Earthman? Do you still love her?"

"Damn it, yes. I wish I didn't."

"I know what you mean. I still love her, too. But I can't go back to her yet. Not until after I've faced the Three-people. Unfortunately, I'm a coward. I've been skulking in this cave for longer than I care to remember, trying to rustle up enough courage to walk through the pass."

"That's hard to believe. I may be a coward but you're not. Hell, you took on both those Creedos together—just to help a complete stranger."

Lee smiled bitterly. "Maybe I was hoping they'd kill me, Earthman. That would solve my problem. I've never felt so low. I haven't the courage either to face the

Three-people or to go back to Rosala and so admit I'm a coward. The Creedos? They're nothing much. They're not cruel nor malicious—just plain and simple bundles of survival reflexes. Like the Melas tree. I was never frightened of them; I've known what they are since I was a child. No, it's the things you know nothing about—except that they're evil and they certainly exist—that really scare you. This shield couldn't protect me against the Three-people. I know that, because it couldn't protect my father."

"Your father?"

"Yes. This was my father's shield. He brought it with him to this same pass, maybe to this very cave. And then he brought it back home with him. He had been a brave, strong man. All right, a bit of an exhibitionist, but he had humor and he was kind. He come home to us, dragging this useless shield, broken in spirit, wrecked in mind. I think he had been frightened nearly to death. He did die soon afterwards—of melancholia the quacks said."

"I'm sorry to hear that, Lee. But it shows there's good reason for you to feel scared."

"Scared, yes, but not downright paralyzed. Which I am. I've let myself down, let Rosala down, and—perhaps worst—let my father down. He promised me he'd leave me his shield, you know. I told him I'd be proud to bear it. When he died I resolved to bear it to the place where, in effect, he'd *really* died. And there face what he had faced, and, if possible, destroy it."

Sherret mused, pulling gently at his beard.

Then he said, "I don't quite get this. You said your people can observe this side of Amara and destroy its inhabitants without actually troubling to come here. Then why, for Pete's sake, haven't they destroyed the evil Three-people?"

Lee said, bitterly, "It may sound strange to you, Earth-man, but it's a matter of ethics. The Three-people have never stirred out of this valley. They've never harmed anyone who didn't intrude on them. For my people tolerance is the chief virtue. The Three-people had made it clear that they wanted to keep to themselves. Therefore, my people didn't approve of men like my father, who liked to go banging at the doors of strangers."

"How did the Three-people make their position clear?"

Lee shrugged. "Apparently they resent being observed by our instruments. On our screens this valley always appears to be in darkness. Our people assumed that to be a deliberate jamming of reception. But I think it may be only a local electrical phenomenon. Still, it's clear that visitors are anything but welcome, for the Three-people either kill them or drive them insane."

"I see. So what you're seeking to prove is that you're as brave as your father. As I see it, you're even braver, for you're aware of what could happen to you."

"You're mistaken, Earthman, My father went with his eyes open—he'd seen what happened to two of his friends. And yet he went all the way. He didn't lose his

confidence, like I have. Oh, he and his friends were different from the rest of my people. They've become decadent through too much ease, too much ingrowing philosophizing. They can reason their way out of making even the smallest decisions. They've lost all initiative. I know; I'm contaminated by the same spiritual disease. The difference is that I'm aware of it. I tell you, unless more characters like my father are born, the true adventurers, my race will presently die away through sheer inertia."

Sherret nodded, considering.

"And thus the native hue of resolution

Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

There's the danger, he thought. Hamlet's disease. An intelligent person can think just too much. If he dwelt too long on his own decision to face the Three-people, he too, would reason himself into a state of chronic indecision.

So, suddenly and rapidly, he said, "The way to Na-Abiza lies through this pass. Right?"

"The shortest way, yes. But there's a longer way around the mountains which you'll have to—"

"I want to go the shortest way. Listen, Lee, here's a proposition—we face the Three-people together. I'd be glad to have you at my side—I could use your support. If we survive, then you'll return to Rosala, a free man. And I'll go on to Na-Abiza to regain the kind of freedom I lost."

Without looking at him, Lee got to his feet and paced the confines of the cave, back and forth. Absently, he kept knotting and feeling the muscles of his arms, as though to reassure himself of his strength.

Then he stopped, looked down at Sherret, and said, "Pride tells me to face this thing alone. Instinct tells me that to do so courts destruction. Wisdom tells me that to have a friend at my side invites success."

"Let us be friends, then," said Sherret, extending a hand.

Lee took it. "Until the slow burn eats its tail."

"I've heard that expression before. What does it mean?"

Lee laughed, and squatted beside Sherret. He was plainly much relieved, relaxed, even happy since his decision.

He said, "It means, figuratively, until the end of the world. Maybe it could mean it in truth, too—we don't really know. It's some kind of fire eating its way around the globe, like a malignant ulcer. It travels hardly faster than a glacier, but it never ceases to progress—in a mathematically straight line. It started somewhere in the barbarian lands and so far it remains there. In fact, I believe it passes through this very mountain range."

"Can't you do anything to stop it?"

Lee hunched his shoulders. “My people might attempt to when it reaches their hemisphere. More likely, they’ll continue to talk about it. It may be only a surface phenomenon. On the other hand, it may run very deep and actually be severing the planet—though I doubt that. But some barbarians believe that when at last it completes its circle around the globe, meets itself and begins to ‘eat its tail,’ then Amara will fall apart in two halves. Like a cut fruit. Which reminds me—are you hungry?”

“Not very. But it would be advisable to get some food inside us before we start out. A fully belly increases confidence.”

Lee laughed again. “You’re right. I have a reasonable larder.”

While Lee prepared a meal, Sherret stood at the cave mouth looking down the pass. In the far distance, crouched between the feet of the steep mountain slopes, was a small settlement of some kind. Houses? Huts? He couldn’t discern details; the blue light was deepening and visibility was poor.

For some time he watched. Lee joined him, and said, “In brighter light you can see them walking about. They look human enough, and there seems to be very few of them. And yet I find—invariably—after I’ve been watching them for a while I begin to shake with dread. Dread of I don’t know what. And then I can’t look any more.”

Sherret felt a cold little shiver pass through him.

“Think I’ve got the shakes coming on myself,” he said, and turned back into the cave. “Let’s eat.”

Over the meal, they talked again, and the feeling of warmth between them grew. It was almost as if they were reunited childhood friends.

In time, Rosala came under discussion.

“She’s a handful that can become more than a handful,” said Lee, with a grin. “But, by heaven, can she love!”

The puritan in Sherret stirred restlessly as Lee went into intimate reminiscences.

“... after that, I don’t believe we eased up all through the yellow time,” ended Lee with a chuckle.

Sherret laughed awkwardly. “She’s just as voluptuous now, I can assure you. But you might be a bit disappointed when you see her as I’ve left her. Your tastes and mine differ a little. Not all that much, but—well, be prepared.”

“I’ll soon get her back into shape,” smiled Lee. “There, you see, I’ve got my confidence back. Maybe I’ll be able to do something for Rosala’s confidence. You know, she’s not by nature a hell-cat. She only gets that way when she feels her man may leave her. It’s just plain insecurity. It must be murder on the nerves to know your very life depends from day to day on the whims and moods of another person.”

Sherret said slowly, “I’m pretty dumb. Yes, of course that’s the root of it, and I

never tumbled to it. She gets as mad and emotionally upset as a little kid whose mother keeps abandoning it. The crises must become more acute with repetition. Hell, why did I have to do that to her—yet again?”

Lee said, “Don’t forget, I did it, too. But I’ll make it up to her—for both of us.”

Sherret felt a stab of pain, the sense of irretrievable loss. He felt he would start yelling if he dwelt too long on thoughts about Rosala. He swung the conversation back to an earlier topic, the ethical beliefs of Lee’s people, and then began an exposition of Goffism and Reparism.

Lee dismissed Goffism as lunacy and Reparism as stifling.

Sherret felt his hackles rise at the mere mention of the word “stifling.”

He objected, “I’ve never thought of Reparism as—” He hedged at the word, and substituted another. “Never thought of it as frustrating. I’ve always pictured it as an open road, leading on and up. And you know where you stand on that road, and everyone recognizes your right to stand there. I don’t say there’s not the odd ease of nepotism but, by and large, promotion depends upon fair and just examinations, merit, length of service, credits awarded for courage and so forth. Not upon chance, right of birth, intrigue, the fantasies of crackpots. Your self-respect, and the respect of others, rests solidly on what you’ve achieved. You know what you can become. So you have a goal in life, a purpose—”

“Horrible!” Lee exclaimed. “Unnatural. Life isn’t like that.”

“No. But it ought to be. Who wants to be natural? Nature is merely doodling around pointlessly. It’s a man’s job to give it an intelligent working plan, a design with significance.”

“Damnation, Earthman, I don’t *like* your plan! I don’t want it imposed on me. I will not be regimented. You think you’re arguing from reason. You’re not. You’re arguing emotionally. Fundamentally, you’re an insecure personality. Like myself. Like Rosala. You need this system to buttress you because you’re afraid to stand alone. But you don’t need just one companion, you want a whole crowd around you to prop up your self-esteem and cheer you on.”

Sherret jumped to his feet, flushed and angry.

“If that’s what you think of me, I’ll show you. I’m going along that pass right now—alone.”

He turned and made to go, but a steely grip fastened on his biceps and pinned him to the spot.

“We made a pact to go together, Earthman,” said Lee quietly. “Are you going to walk out on me, too?”

Sherret was silent.

“Sometimes I think politics are more dangerous than the Three-people,” Lee went on. “Let us go together now—while we’re still friends.”

He relaxed his grip. Sherret turned, a little shamefacedly. They looked each other

in the eyes seriously. It was a small moment of truth. They knew, and admitted wordlessly, that they had both been postponing the big, vital moment, that the long discussion was largely an excuse for delay.

“Okay,” said Sherret. “I’m ready. Really.”

CHAPTER SIX



THEY WALKED along the valley side by side. The blue had passed into the purple time again, and the place looked unutterably gloomy. Sherret wished the phrase “the valley of the shadow of death” would cease recurring in his mind.

He said, “I don’t like the violet hour. Everything bad seems to happen to me then.”

“I rather like it,” said Lee. “It creates a mood of mystery and poetry. See, the lights are on in the village.”

The little houses in the distance had lighted windows.

The two men walked on in preoccupied silence. The mountain walls on either side had become topless in the purple obscurity. Lee was weaponless, but carried the shield. He knew it was probably useless, but he had made a vow.

Sherret had brought all his traveling gear. He had private doubts that he would ever see Na-Abiza now, but he had made a promise.

He felt empty inside as they reached the outskirts of the village. It had only the single street, and that was completely deserted. To him it appeared pretty much like a village one could find in the southern Highlands of Scotland. Some neat houses on two floors, some bungalows, a few cottages and shacks. All were detached. Each had its small cultivated garden. There were trees planted at regular intervals to form an avenue.

It was very quiet—but so were Scottish villages. Lights glowed behind window drapes, but some houses were dark and seemed empty.

It was the most ordinary-looking place he’d seen on Amara. The purple was too intense, but apart from that it could be an autumn evening in the purple mists of the Trossachs.

Familiar, harmless.

Nevertheless, he found himself fingering the handle of the machete depending from his belt.

Lee noticed. “Getting edgy, friend?”

Sherret nodded. “I’m scared green. Or purple, if you like.”

“So am I. It’s all just too innocent, isn’t it? I’m glad we came together.”

They reached the end of the street without perceiving a movement of any kind. The wind which had streamed through this pass not long ago had died to nothing. The air was oppressively still. The silence itself was unnerving. It was as though the world was holding its breath in anticipation of some shattering explosion.

But they could hear the sound of their own breathing.

They turned and looked back along the empty street.

Sherret felt an unworthy impulse to suggest that this was enough, honor was satisfied, they could now leave with dignity. But he knew it wasn't enough.

"Let's pay a social call," said Lee. "Which house d'you think might have 'Welcome' on the mat?"

Sherret's secret little shame bred an over-compensating boldness.

"I like the look of that one." He pointed to the largest of all, double-fronted, on two floors.

"I'm with you there," said Lee.

They negotiated a front gate and a short path to the door. It was a flat, bare door. Deliberately, Lee thumped on it thrice with his great fist.

They waited.

They heard faint sounds of movement within the house but no one came to the door.

Lee banged again, and shouted, "Wake up in there!"

No answer.

"No," said Sherret finally. "No 'Welcome' on the mat here. Probably no mat. Let's try one of the neighbors."

"I've a hunch none of them's going to rush out to welcome us." Lee was beginning to get angry, partly through fear, partly because of what the inhabitants had done to his father.

"Damned pack of murderers!" he bit out suddenly, and rammed his shoulder against the door. Its bolts burst apart and it flew open, revealing a lighted passage.

"We'll root 'em out," Lee snapped. "Come on."

Sherret followed him. They opened doors into two empty rooms, and then in the third and largest they found one of the Three-people.

He was sitting quietly in a deep, hide-covered chair, and looked up as they burst in. The furniture was of good quality and looked to be handmade. Murals of mountain scenery covered the walls and the skins of unknown animals covered the floor. A white spiral of light glowed in the ceiling.

It seemed reasonably normal and civilized.

So did the occupant, who wore an elaborately embroidered jacket and comfortable, fur-topped high boots. He was a frail, oldish man with gray-white hair

and a mild, kind face.

He regarded them benevolently.

“My name is Canato,” he said, in a pleasantly deep voice. “It’s kind of you to call. But would you mind leaving right away? I should like to be more hospitable, but you must know of our bad reputation. Believe me, it’s well-founded. You are in mortal danger in this village. Leave the valley while you can, and please, waste no time.”

“I’m sure your warning is well meant, Canato,” said Lee, closing the door but watching the man in the chair warily. “I can assure you we’ve not come here to waste time. We just want some information. I, personally, want to know what happened to various visitors here from my country. Most particularly, what happened to my father.”

“If your father is not buried in the graveyard just outside of the village, then he managed to get away.”

“He got away,” said Lee savagely, “but at some expense.”

“Friend, you are dangerously angry and vindictive. I implore you to go.”

Lee leant his shield against the wall, strode over and grabbed a handful of the fancy jacket. He lifted Canato by it and growled in his face, “I don’t want advice. As I told you, I want information. Are you going to talk or must I apply pressure?”

“How can he talk when you’re choking him with his collar?” Sherret protested, disturbed by a sympathetic choking sensation himself.

Slowly, reluctantly, Lee let Canato fall back in his chair.

His face suffused, Canato tried to answer but couldn’t recover his breath.

Lee snapped, “Earthman, take a look around the house. I’ll keep guard on this specimen.”

“All right,” said Sherret. He wanted free and easy movement, so he slipped his rucksack off. He started for the door, then paused. Canato had raised his hands in an imploring gesture, making inarticulate noises, striving to speak.

“He doesn’t want you to search the house,” said Lee. “That means he’s hiding something. Go and find what it is—but be careful.”

Sherret nodded, unhooking his machete. He stepped out into the passage. He was glad Lee couldn’t see the way his hands were beginning to shake. He ignored the two unoccupied rooms on this floor, and began to climb the stairs cautiously. He saw that the lights were on upstairs, which was some relief. He didn’t feel happy and was having to suppress his imagination. It would have been more difficult in the dark.

Yet, did the lights upstairs mean that there were people upstairs?

He reached the top of the stairs and found himself looking along a corridor of doors. A strip of light gleamed under every one, and there were six of them. His

mouth became dry. Yet again, this was like one of the old nursery nightmares becoming real. The one which centered around something nasty hiding behind the door.

Which door? And what was the something?

He braced himself and kicked open the nearest door.

The room appeared to be empty. There was no reaction, no sound. But there was that hidden space between the door and the wall...

He made a grand leap into the room, and whirled around, machete poised. There was nothing behind the door. Although the light was on, this room didn't appear to be in use. Some odd pieces of furniture, some paintings and general bric-a-brac were piled against the wall. That was all.

He visited each room in turn. First the screwing up of courage, the kick, the leap, and the anti-climax of the empty room. Only two of the rooms showed signs of being lived in. One was a bedroom. The other, the biggest room of all, was a studio workshop. There was a workbench littered with tools and wood shavings. There was an easel and a little table bearing a trayful of paints. There were a number of canvases stacked on shelves.

He wandered around, picking up and inspecting pieces of carved wood. They looked like the parts of an ornamental display case.

Then, shaking him to the core, a scream of awful terror came from the lower floor, swelled up the stairs, echoed along the corridor outside. It didn't sound like a man's voice. But he knew it was—and it was Lee's.

A richly carved strip fell from Sherret's hand. It rattled loudly on the wooden floor in the silent aftermath of that scream.

Snatching up the machete, he rushed outside and down the stairs, hearing strange, gasping sobs. He tore into the room where he had left Lee.

The big man was lying in a corner, sobbing, arms crossed in front of his face, as if he were trying to ward off a murderous attacker. But the only other creature in the room was Canato, slumped in his chair, his face turned away from Lee and expressing infinite sadness.

"Lee, Lee, what is it?"

Sherret dropped on one knee beside Lee and gently forced his arms apart. Lee's face was contorted with horror, his eyes bulging glassily. It reminded Sherret of Rosala's painting of himself in the grip of the Melas tree.

Then he dropped Lee's arms and started back with a cry. For one side of Lee's throat had been torn out and the blood was pumping out in spurts.

"Oh, my God!"

Sherret beat his knuckles together. He didn't know what to do. Nothing could close that wound or staunch that flow.

He blundered across to Canato.

“You! Did you do that?”

“Partly. Not entirely,” said Canato in a low, tired voice.

“I’ll deal with you later,” said Sherret between his teeth. “Is there any kind of a doctor in this damned village, anyone who could help?”

“No one can come here. No one can help. Your friend is dying.”

Sherret groaned and rushed back to Lee. The blood was a rapidly enlarging pool. He knelt in it regardless.

“Lee!”

Lee’s face was deathly white, but much calmer. His eyes were still glassy, but now half-closed. A shade of recognition appeared in them.

“It’s gone,” he whispered thickly. “Go, Earthman... before it... returns... Go to Rosala. Give her my love.”

The voice became a faint bubbling sound.

There was a final, choked whisper. “Earthman... I never knew... your name”

Then he died.

Although he’d known him but briefly, this was the only real friend among men whom Sherret had made since he left Earth. He felt desolated.

Gently, he closed Lee’s eyes. He continued to kneel, motionless, praying only for control over the murderous anger pouring through him.

Then he got up and went over to Canato.

“Now, explain this.”

“Do as your friend told you. Go now, quickly. I shall see that he is decently buried.”

“I shall not leave this house until you tell me—”

“All right, but you take a terrible risk. Listen, and don’t question, then go.”

Then Canato went on earnestly, urgently, “My kind have become cursed with a severe mental disorder. A major split in the psyche—no time to theorize now. The body-mind relationship has always been inexplicable; it’s far more complex than we ever imagined. In short, the raw antagonistic side of our nature has split away from us. It exists independently, a disembodied entity. Such things are possible, believe me.

“And now, whenever two of us meet, after a short while the two crude entities fuse and form a third being. This amalgam is real and material, but only in relation to those from whom it has sprung. It is concentrated antagonism, the killer in all of us. It tends to attack that one of us whose baser emotions form the greater part of it... fear, anger.

“Your friend was full of hate and revenge at that time. It helped to kill him. He was terribly frightened, and yet he was brave. He fought the thing with his bare hands.

“You didn’t see it. You couldn’t; it wasn’t part of you. The amalgam dissolved when you came. This sometimes happens when another person joins the group suddenly—it’s as though he upsets a balance of forces. But usually the larger the group, the more power the antagonist derives from it.

“We infect others. Therefore we have voluntarily put ourselves in isolation. My kind are doomed to live and die alone. Each in his own house, keeping his distance, tending his own garden, trying to make some kind of bearable life for himself. Painting, writing, composing, handicrafts. I like making my own furniture.

“But no two of us dare linger together for more than a few—Oh! Go. Please go. I have talked too long.”

Uneasily, Sherret turned to go. But something was forming itself rapidly between him and the door.

“Too late!” cried Canato in despair, and turned his face away.

Fear swept through Sherret like a cold wind. He tried to outflank the darkening, cloudy shape and reach the door. And then, all at once, it leapt into shape focus like a stereoscopic moving picture.

But it was no recorded shadow. It was here, now, real as himself, and pulsing with energy.

There were traces of Canato in it, but predominantly it was a nightmare version of himself. Every feature was enlarged and distorted as though by some virulent glandular disease. The body was taller, bulkier, and grotesquely misshapen.

The thing was mad and blind and had no conscious control over its actions. Somehow he knew that. It was senseless and without pity. It was an embodied destructive urge.

There could be no appeal and no defense.

The sightless eyes stared at nothing. The mouth hung open like a dead man’s. The teeth were huge. There were spots of blood on them!

The hands, with fingers spread like claws, were the hands of a strangler.

This thing had been born in his mind when he was born. It had been created out of the stark fear of strangulation. Always it had lived within him, imprisoned, suppressed, seeking the opportunity to break out into a form of its own. And then—to stifle that other which had stifled it for so long.

Now, in the land of the Three-people, it had escaped at last. Now, here, somewhere, that tyrant was at its mercy.

The sightless eyes turned this way and that.

Then they became still, seeming to stare straight into Sherret’s eyes. And then,

shockingly, they became sighted.

Sherrot's mind was swimming as, blurrily, he was transformed into a three-fold personality. He was his fear-stricken, petrified self. He was also the drained out Canato in the chair, keeping his head turned away, trying to see nothing, abysmally unhappy, lonely, despairing.

And he was also—it.

It was just a pair of hands reaching for a throat to throttle to the accompaniment of an hysterical scream. *Kill! Kill!*

An insensate repetition.

The manifold viewpoint coalesced back to just one —the viewpoint of the hunted Sherret. The thing had used his vision to locate him. And now it was advancing to the attack, its eager hands outstretched.

Sherret reeled back against the wall. The hysterical scream still seemed to be going on, but now it was incoherent, wordless. It was Sherret himself screaming, as Lee had screamed before him.

He was grabbing wildly for security, anything to cling to, as he had grabbed at the grass tufts at the edge of the mud swamp. He clawed uselessly at the smooth wall. Then his fingers encountered Lee's shield still leaning there. Like a hunted animal, seeking any sanctuary, however inadequate, he squirmed behind it.

Dimly, he was aware he was crouching beside his rucksack on the floor. Then fear-sharpened memory flung up a wild hope. He scrabbled at the rucksack, found the little grenades, slid one from its band. His thumb nail tore off the capsule's nipple.

He flung the grenade awkwardly, numbing his forearm against the shield's hard edge.

The explosion wasn't so much a sound as a sudden and agonizing increase of pressure against his eardrums. The blast-driven shield rammed him hard against the wall.

Then the pressure dropped. The shield fell away, clanged on the floor. It had served its purpose, and for the second time saved his life; not a single splinter had penetrated it.

Not that Sherret noted that for some time. It was a long time before he moved his trembling hands from his face and dared to look at the room.

It had vanished. But the air was still thick with bitter smoke. The murals were full of ragged holes and cracks, and half the furniture was just so much smashed wood.

Lee lay in the lake of his own blood.

Canato still sat in his big hide chair, but looked smaller. Plastoid splinters were embedded all over the leather. At least one had passed through his heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN



SHERBET never did remember leaving the house or the valley.

The next thing he was really aware of was the dirt-grimed face of a savage staring at him with wild eyes from a tangle of red hair.

Slowly, he became oriented. The face was looking up at him from a pool of still water, and was his own.

He washed the grime from it in the same water, plastered down the shock of hair, combed the beard with his fingers. He noticed that his hands had become rather thin. He felt very tired, hungry, and confused.

He squatted by the pool, looking around. The first thing that struck him was the peculiarity of the light. The sky was a rich yellow, yet he was seeing things in fairly natural colors—natural to Earth, that was. He shifted to look behind him, and had to shield his eyes from the glare of what seemed to be a white-hot cable stretched taut along the ground some distance off.

It either began or ended at a point maybe a hundred yards from him, and ran off across flat grass-land for as far as the eye could follow. In that direction the horizon bore what seemed to be a long, low ridge, until Sherret recognized the V-shaped nick in it—the pass.

Then memories came back like a rushing multitude. With them, the anguish of the realization of a double loss.

But among them were no memories of what had happened since he looked upon a shattered room containing two dead men, where his experiences had carried him beyond the verge of sanity.

His witless wandering had brought him to this lozenge-shaped natural pool in a waste of green grass. He stood up and made a more careful survey of the area.

In the opposite direction to the far-away mountain range there was what appeared to be another ridge. He looked hard at it and saw that it was, in fact, no more than a ridge. Although it formed the sky-line it was actually quite near. The grass carpet rolled up and over it.

His gaze wandered along the crest, then focused on what looked like a small conical cairn heaped there. A primitive grave? His eyes watered as he forced them to gather more detail.

He divined that it was no cairn, but part of something which stood beyond the ridge.

He was staring at the dull nose of a space-ship—and it could only be the *Pegasus*

For all his anxious calculations, detours and misadventures, he had arrived at Na-Abiza at last without realizing it.

The discovery gave him a real shot in the arm. He even took time out to walk back and take a closer look at the line of white effulgence. Not too close a look; its brightness pained the eyes. Moreover, he suspected radioactivity here.

So this was the “slow burn.” It seemed to be a channel of liquid fire, hardly more than a couple of inches wide. The eye could detect no progress. All the same, the burn was progressing, as he knew from Lee’s description, and must be heading for the grassy ridge.

He surveyed its line of march. With a little shock, he saw that the *Pegasus* stood plumb on an extrapolation of that line. It was a chance in millions. But he wondered if it, like many other odd freaks on Amara, was due only to the laws of chance. There seemed no laws of nature here. Why should there be laws of chance?

He set off towards the ship. There was a vague sense of something missing. Then, for the first time, he noticed that he had arrived at this place minus two old faithfuls—the rucksack and the machete. They’d accompanied him for so long that it seemed a pity they wouldn’t complete the journey with him. He guessed he’d left them back there in that room of horror.

He climbed on to the top of the ridge; the effort sapped a deal of his small bonus of energy. Now he could see that the ridge had concealed more than the bulk of the *Pegasus*. There was an irregular cluster of wattle and daub huts, the crudest he had seen on Amara. Among them a few natives were strolling. They were tall and well built. In the yellow sunlight they looked yellow, which meant that they could be yellow or white.

He observed with surprise that the base of the spaceship was totally enclosed by a high fence, also of sticks and clay. None of the crew was visible.

This was his goal. Alone on his raft, he had yearned to get here. For this he had walked out on Rosala. Now, with the goal attained, he felt strangely indifferent. He walked down towards the ship, desiring food more than human company.

The natives noticed him. They gathered, whispering. They seemed excited. By now, he reckoned, they must know—by sight, anyhow—all of the crew members of the *Pegasus*. So he was a phenomenon; the new Earth-man who had arrived on Amara somehow without a ship. Maybe he could fly through space by just waving his arms like the wings of a bird.

As he neared, without exception they sank to their knees and bowed their heads to him.

He acknowledged the salutation with weary amusement. “Well, thanks, folks. But no autographs today.”

They remained silent, bowed, reverent.

There was a gate in the fence around the ship. He pushed through.

At the bottom of the ship’s ladder, Captain Bagshaw was sunning himself in a sagging canvas chair. He wore only bathing trunks, which had stretched and split. On his left was a big pile of fruit, loaves, and native dishes. On his right, within

reach, a swollen wineskin lay in the shade of a broad-leaved potted plant.

Sherret stopped short at the sight of him.

Was this Bagshaw, the immaculate Englishman, sartorial wonder of the Space Corps, proud of his narrow waist and broad shoulders, affectionately known as “The Tailor’s Dummy?”

Bagshaw was equally surprised at the sight of Sherret.

“Who the devil are you?”

Sherret performed a salute which the Captain ignored.

“Lieutenant Sherret, sir, of the *Endeavor*.”

“Alex Sherret? Good heavens, so it is. All that face fungus fooled me. You’ve lost a bit of weight, too. Come and sit down, boy. Have a drink.”

“I’d rather have something to eat, sir.”

“Help yourself from that heap. All fresh—today’s offerings.”

Bagshaw became all fat buttocks as he reached behind his chair for another which lay there folded. He dragged it back with a grunt, failed to get the rods in the right slots, and let it subside in shapeless disorder.

“Damn silly things,” he said and abandoned it.

Again, Sherret found it hard to believe that this flushed, careless drunk, all sweaty paunch and flabby limbs, was Captain Robert Bagshaw, one-time Number One Cadet of the Space Academy, champion middleweight boxer of the Space Corps, Fifth Division, renowned disciplinarian, chess master—and total abstainer.

For that was as Sherret remembered him. His old hero.

“Have a drink, Alex,” Bagshaw said again.

Sherret had a mouth full of newly baked bread, but he said, muffledly, “Thanks, I will. I need one.”

“Don’t we all?” said the Captain, heaving the wineskin onto his enormous thighs. He poured two large glasses of orange liquid.

“Damn stuff looks like orangeade in this yellow light,” he said. “Don’t let that fool you—it isn’t. In white light, in the ship, it’s red. In the red time, it’s a beautiful dark ruby. Heart’s blood, we call it. Native brew. Potent. It’ll be the death of me. Cheers.”

Sherret watched him over the rim of his glass.

“Is the ship—” he began, and choked as a fireball exploded in his gullet.

Captain Bagshaw guffawed. “You’ll get used to that delayed action in time.”

When Sherret could speak, he tried again, “Is the ship still being run under Repairism?”

“Good lord, no. Repairism is passé—don’t you know?”

There was more than a trace of bitterness in Bagshaw's tone. He took another gulp of the brew.

"Goffism is the bright new hope of Earth," he went on. "Don't believe in it myself. Don't believe in anything much any more."

"You don't have Goffism here, then?"

"We do not. We certainly do not. We don't have any Kings for a Day kicking us around. We all do as we damn well please."

"But—"

"Look, son, we've had it. The dream days of Reparism are over for us. Oh, it'll come back. Like the horse. After we're dead. That won't do us much good, will it? I've no family, so what the hell does it matter to me? I used to sit here on my then respectable ass waiting for notification from HQ that I'd been given an award for the success of this expedition. I lived for those gongs, stars and ribbons, y'know—the eternal fossilized boy scout. I hoped they'd make me a colonel. But those Goffists back on Earth—why, they don't even bother themselves to answer our messages. What does the latest jack-in-office care about us stuck out here on Amara? They're too busy with their private vendettas. Look at what happened to that poor chump Maxton."

"What, sir?"

"Don't 'sir' me, Alex. I'm Bob to you. Good old Bob Bagshaw. Maxton? Oh, they hung him. Chief Engineer's orders—what's his name?—Mackay. He was sorry afterwards. The Scots get murderous in drink, y'know. They were all blind drunk. Must be a foul native brew in those parts. This stuff isn't like that. It makes you feel fine, good, benevolent—know what I mean? We *Pegasus* chaps go like a bomb together here. Happy band of brothers, and all that. The natives worry me, though. The men, that is. The women are a fine-looking lot, comely wenches. You saw them?"

Sherret started. His thoughts were far away. He was thinking about Captain Maxton and his fate, and his own shipmates, and their likely fate.

"Yes, I saw the natives, sir. They seemed to imagine I was a little tin god."

Bagshaw shook his head. His fat cheeks, wobbled. He tapped the ship's ladder.

"*This* is the little tin god—the *Pegasus*. At least, it's supposed to be the temple of the god. And we're the priests of the god, to be respected as such. That's what the natives made up out of their own little heads when we arrived, and at the time we saw no reason to disillusion them. For they're a tough crowd. They'd kill you as soon as look at you if you didn't have some kind of hold over them. I was a fool. I took the easy, ready-made, reach-me-down way. Not like me in those days, either. But there you are. And now it's going to backfire on me—on all of us."

"In what way, sir?"

"You've seen the slow burn, as they call it?"

“Yes. It’s heading right for the ship,” said Sherret, starting another loaf.

“You’re right, Alex. It’s heading for the village, too. When *Pegasus* landed smack in its path, the natives assumed a god had descended from Olympus, or thereabouts, to cry, ‘Halt! You shall not pass. I have come to save Na-Abiza.’ Egotistical lot! Swollen-headed mutts! But it’ll burn through poor old *Pegasus* like a super blow-torch. In anything from ten to fifteen years, I reckon. But it’s unlikely I’ll be around then. Heart’s blood will have taken care of me. But how better to pass the time than in merry wassail? My men like the women here, too. Most of ’em have gone native to some extent. Hang the women, I say. For me—the grape.”

“But, sir—Bob—why don’t you get to hell out of it before the showdown? When the natives see the ship succumb to the slow burn, and their village in danger again, they’ll go hopping mad. If you’re still around here, they’ll probably kill you. Get out while the going’s good. Amara’s plenty big enough to get lost in.”

“Lost? I’m already lost, Alex. Still, I did plan a move from here, long ago. But I’d already lost authority through accepting this priesthood masquerade. The men had become too happy here. They’d never been made such a fuss of in all their lives. Not a man would come with me. Not one. If only *one* of ’em had crossed to my side of the line... Pity you weren’t drafted to my bunch, Alex. You’d have come with me.”

“Sure I would, Bob.”

Bagshaw sighed. “It means everything to have someone you can count on.”

Sherret thought, You’re too right.

Aloud, he said, “Well, it’s not too late. Come with me now.”

Bagshaw shook his head. “Too out of condition. Amara’s too tough for me now, I can’t take it. I’ve been out there. You can’t rely on a damn thing. You never know what’s going to hit you next, but one thing you can be sure of—it’ll be an unpleasant surprise packet. An unpredictable world. I can’t adapt to it, I’m a product of Reparism. There’s no place for me on this lunatic planet. But if you *can* take it, then you’re a man, my son. Got a B-stick on you? No, I thought not. Run out of ’em long since. Know what? I wish we hadn’t run right out of fuel when we landed. Wish we had something left in the drive-box, just enough to blast *Pegasus* out of here—and I wouldn’t care a curse where we crashed. End with a bang, not a whimper. Where’s your glass?”

“Thanks, I’ve had enough. Enough of everything. I’m moving on now, Bob.”

“But you haven’t met any of the boys. Digger, Fritzzy, and Doc Lamont—you know them. Doc’s up in the ship. The others are with their lady loves in the village. They’d be glad to see you.”

“Another time, maybe,” said Sherret. But he knew there would never be another time. “Good-bye, Captain.” He grasped Bagshaw’s hand and shook it.

“I’m sorry you’re not staying, Alex. Yet, in another way, I’m glad. You may make out. The rest of us have made a mess of it.”

He insisted that Sherret take a big plastic bag stuffed with food from the heap of offerings, and a full wineskin. He saw him off at the gate, and the natives made obeisance to both of them. Bagshaw indicated them with good-humored contempt.

“If they could read our minds, within the hour we’d be fattening all the region kites. Especially me.” He thumped his paunch.

Sherret climbed up and over the ridge, and never once looked back. There was nothing to look back on. Na-Abiza—the Na-Abiza of his imagination—just wasn’t there.

He recalled that conversation with the Paddy at the outset of the trek. It had seemed sheer nonsense at the time.

“Have you ever been to Na-Abiza?”

“Yes, I have, human, but I didn’t get there.”

“Why not?”

“Because it wasn’t there when I got there.”

“But you just said you didn’t get there.”

“Of course I didn’t, human, if it wasn’t there.”

“Well, is it there now?”

“How can I tell? I’m here, not there.”

Yes, he would always be here, but never there. The paradox was that a man just wasn’t here, was nothing, if he weren’t trying to get there. Shakespeare had said it, as he’d said everything. You had “to shine in use, or rust in monumental mockery.”

But one didn’t learn from books, only from one’s own experience. As a youth, he’d read Stevenson’s proclamation that to travel hopefully was a better thing than to arrive. He agreed, but mental subscription wasn’t enough. As a man, he’d have to learn it the hard way.

He set his sights on the next goal, the V-shaped notch in the distant mountains. Once, coming from the other direction, he had thought of it as the gateway to Na-Abiza. Well, it still could be. Without Rosala, for him there could be no Na-Abiza.

It was the deep orange time, and he was well into the pass, almost back to the village. He was sad but not afraid. The Three-people were not dangerous so long as you didn’t consort with them. And, as he knew, isolated in their separate cells, they wished only to be left alone.

Then he saw the graveyard, just off the road. Fleeing from the house, he must have stumbled mindlessly past it before. It was well tended and there were two new graves, heaped with fresh earth, with carved wooden boards at the heads of each.

He picked his way between other graves to them.

The inscriptions, not long completed by an unknown villager, said baldly on the

one board: LAUREL CANATO.

And even more baldly on the other: UNKNOWN.

There were several other nameless headboards around, too, but they were old and weathered. This could only be Lee's.

He stood for a long time looking at it, remembering. But for the accidental death of Canato breaking up the amalgam, he himself would probably be filling another nameless grave here.

Just behind him, someone stepped on a twig and snapped it. He started violently and spun around.

It was Rosala. Surprise stunned him. He could only stare at her. She was wearing a tunic he'd never seen before. It was somewhat travel-stained.

And she was lovely—lovelier even than he remembered—in the warm orange light.

She was smiling, yet on the verge of tears. She could say nothing, but held out her arms to him.

They embraced with passion.

After a time, he said, "How did you come to be here? I don't understand. You said Petrans are forbidden to leave their own area. The law—"

"I broke the law, darling. I didn't want to go on living on sufferance any longer. I decided I'd rather be dead."

"Yet you're alive."

"Yes. I think more alive than I've ever been. Because I decided not to wait for my man to come back to me, but to go and seek him."

A doubt, arising from the old jealousy, came upon him. He held her a little apart from him.

"Myself? Or Lee?" He added, a trifle sourly, "As it happens, you've found us both."

"Both? What do you mean?"

Haltingly, he explained, and was as distressed as she. She knelt over the grave and cried freely. He watched her with mixed feelings.

He said, awkwardly, "We haven't the right to be sorry for him. Rather, admire his triumph, for he was not defeated. He faced and fought the ultimate horror, and kept his sanity. He proved himself a better man than his father. That was what he wished most to do."

"Even more than..."

"Yes. Honestly, I think so. Even more than living with you."

Abruptly, she stood up, dried her eyes, and said, "Let us get away from this terrible place."

“And go where?”

“Wherever you want to go, darling.”

He was still doubtful. “You’ll go with me—as second best?”

“Lee is dead. I am released from any obligation to Lee. But that doesn’t mean that you were second best. When Lee left me, I could not bring myself to go and look for him. I stayed in my house, clinging to what I thought was my life. But when you left me, I realized I had no life. There was no life without you. I came seeking you, not Lee.”

He kissed her.

“Well, now we can go back.”

“There’s no going back, Sherry, once the law has been broken. Anyhow, I don’t want to go back to the house. I’m happier free from it.”

“But your pictures, and all—”

“You said you believed art wasn’t the whole of existence. I believe that, too, now. All I want is you. I can learn to paint and sculpt again, later, in a more deeply satisfying way. It came all too easily before. It was no credit to me.”

He frowned at her, puzzled.

She explained, “It was the Power acting through me. Petrans are born mediums, so long as they act in accordance with the law. But a renegade Petran loses the ability to tap the Power. If he quits his area, the contact breaks. I can tell you this now—now that I’m outside the law.”

“You renounced the Power—for me?”

“When it came to it, there was no choice. I just didn’t want to live without you. Anyhow, I’ve gained, not lost. My body is my own. Try as you will, you can’t change me now. I exist in my own right, and believe in my own existence. I shall live and die like any normal humanoid. It was a paradox. If you were content to let the Power act through you, then you had no faith in your own power to act independently—or even to exist independently. If you renounce the Power, then you gain faith in yourself. Maybe I’m the first Petran ever to learn this.”

“I wonder? Maybe you could be the first of many, Rosala.”

“You mean I might persuade other Petrans to follow my example? But they would lack my motive.”

She kissed him tenderly.

“Thanks for the compliment, darling,” he said. “But our kind of love isn’t unique. A Petran must always love a non-Petran. There are other Sherrets, other Lees in this wide world. At least, go and talk to your people. It might lead to something—perhaps the first worthy stock arising on Amara. Frankly, I see little other hope.

“Consider. With very few exceptions, Lee’s people are soft, selfish,

unenterprising. They've sunk into a torpor. The first contingent of mankind to reach this planet has failed to adjust; it's finished. It'll be a long time before we can hope for anything better from my world, falling to pieces under Goffism. The Three-people have branched off into a ghastly psycho-biological *cul-de-sac*. The Paddies and Jackies seem to be poetic visionaries, inspired, maybe, but as practical as a mad March hare. You're our only hope, my dear."

She was lost in thought for a time.

Then she said, "It's nice to feel I may be important— or, at any rate, be of some little significance. But, actually, I'm still dependent—on you. Nothing will mean anything if I can't do it with you."

"Then we'll make it a joint enterprise. We'll try to found a new race. What greater adventure could there be? Hell, when I look back, I see I've been little more than a child crying in the dark. I thought Reparism was something, but it was only a refuge. I was frightened of this unpredictable universe. When you get that scared, when you can't control the circumstances of your existence, you cling to the proven and familiar. Then you try to kid yourself you've licked life. You were right, Rosala. I needed a lot of people around me to hold me up. But not any more. I know the stuff I'm made of now—good and bad. It's a crazy mixture, like a witch's brew. But I think I can handle it now, instead of it handling me."

She smiled at him. "Let's go."

They walked, arm in arm, along the valley.

He said, "There's some woods we'll have to go through beyond the pass."

"Yes, I know, Sherry. I came through them on the way."

"You were lucky to get through alive. There's a nasty breed of creatures living in them called—"

"The Creedos? Lee had told me all about them. I knew what to do. I came up through the stream, all the way. That's the way we'll have to go back."

"Damn you, woman, I don't seem able to tell you anything you don't already know. Oh, well, we live and learn."

"Isn't that what we're here for?" she asked.

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[scanned anonymously]

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