

# FANTASTIC

SCIENCE FACT & FICTION

# UNIVERSE

JANUARY 1960

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TWELVE MONTHS  
AND A DAY

by

POUL ANDERSON

THE  
PEACEMAKERS

a startling new story

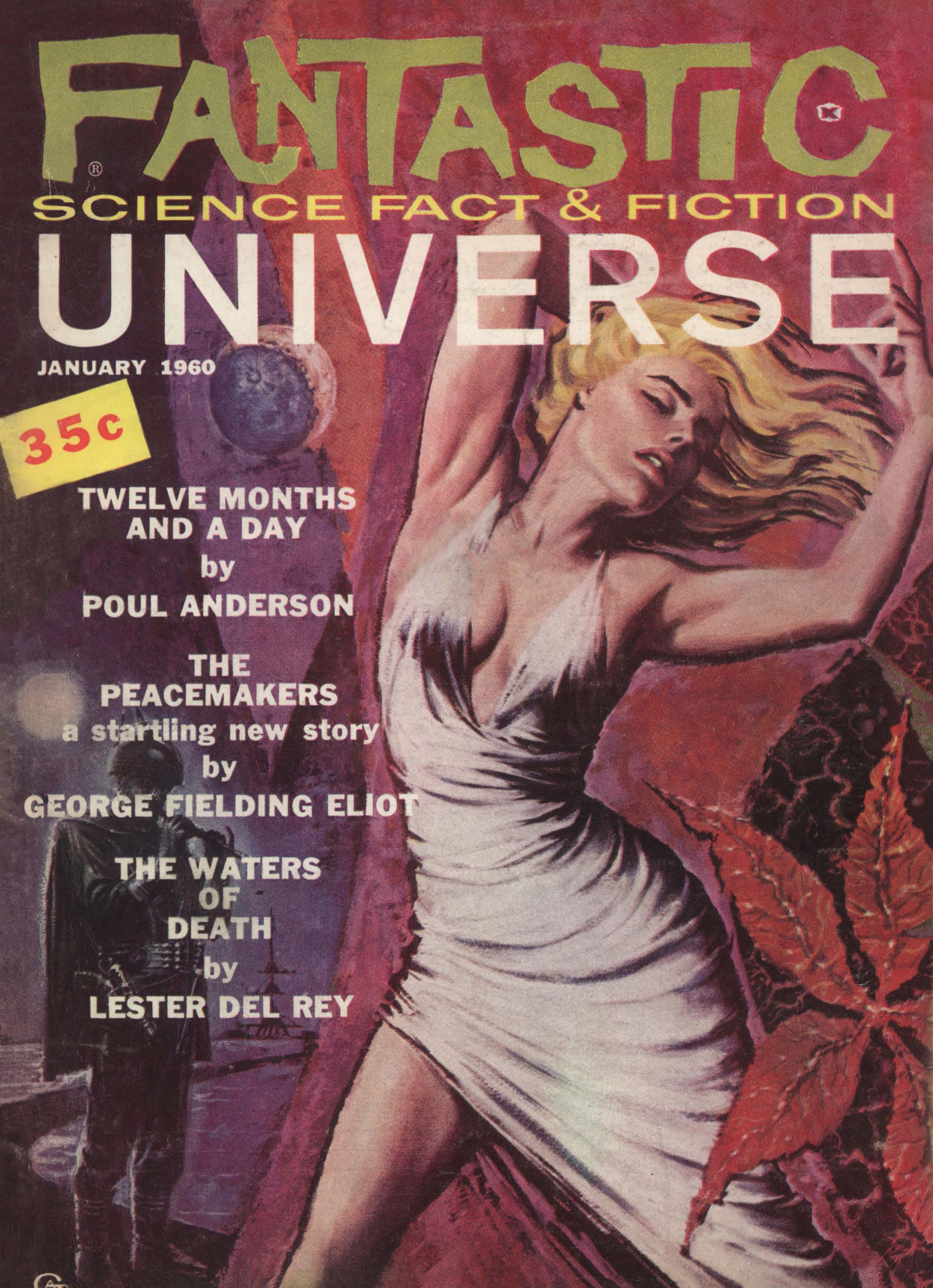
by

GEORGE FIELDING ELIOT

THE WATERS  
OF  
DEATH

by

LESTER DEL REY





# FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

HENRY SCHARF

*Publisher*

JANUARY 1960

Vol. 12 No. 3

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# A TWELVEMONTH AND A DAY

BY POUL ANDERSON

AFTER the boat which went ahead to make arrangements had radioed all clear, the *Quetzal* departed orbit and swung toward the planet. Her approach was cautious, as befitted a craft in regions hardly known, and Miguel Tolteca expected a couple of hours free to watch.

He was not exactly a sybarite, but he liked to do things in style. First he dialed *Privacy* on his door, lest some friendly soul barge in to pass the time of day. Then he put Castillo's *Symphony No. 2 in D Minor* with *Subsonics* on the tapester, mixed himself a rum and conchoru, converted the bunk to a lounge, and sat down with his free hand on the controls of the outside scanner. Its screen grew black and full of wintry unwinking stars. He searched in a clockwise direction until Gwydion swam into view, a tiny disc upon darkness, the clearest blue he had ever seen.

A fist struck the door. "Oa," called Tolteca, irritated, "can you not read?" "My mistake" said the voice of Ra-

ven. "I thought you were the chief."

Tolteca swore, folded the lounge into a stool, and stepped across the tiny cabin. A momentary change in weight informed him that the *Quetzal* had put on a spurt of extra acceleration. Doubtless to dodge some meteor swarm, the engineer part of him thought. They'd be more common here than around Nuevamercia, this being a newer system. . . Otherwise the pseudogee held firm. The spaceship was a precision instrument.

He opened the door. "Very well, Commandant." He pronounced the hereditary title with a curtness that approached insult. "What is so urgent?"

Raven stood a moment watching him. Tolteca was a young man, middling tall, with wide stiffly held shoulders. His face was thin and sharp, under brown hair drawn back into the short queue customary on his planet, and the eyes were levelly aimed. However much the United Republics of Nuevamercia made of their

shiny new democracy, it meant something to stem from one of their old professional families. He wore the uniform of the Argo Astrographical Company, but that was only a simple, pleasing version of everyday garb, blue tunic, gray culottes, white stockings, and no insignia.

Raven closed the door. "By chance," he said, his tone mild again, "one of my men overheard some of yours dicing to settle who should debark first after you and the ship's captain."

"Well, that sounds harmless enough," said Tolteca sarcastically. "Do you expect us to observe any official pecking order?"

"No. What, um, puzzled me was, nobody mentioned my own detachment."

Tolteca raised brows. "You wanted your men to sit in on the dice game?"

"According to what my soldier reported to me, there appears to be no doctrine for planetfall and afterward."

"Well," said Tolteca, "as a simple courtesy to our hosts, Captain Utiel and I—and you, if you wish—will go out first to greet them. There's to be quite a welcoming committee, you know. But beyond that, good ylem, Commandant, what difference does it make who comes down the gangway in what order?"

Raven stood quite still. It was the common habit of Lochlanna aristocrats. They didn't stiffen; their manners never showed any rigidity, least of all at moments of importance; but their muscles seemed to go loose and their eyes glazed over with calculation. Tolteca sometimes thought that that alone made them so alien that the Namerican Revolution had always been inevitable.

Finally—thirty seconds later, but it seemed longer—Raven said: "I can see how this misunderstanding occurred, Sir Engineer. Your people have developed several unique institutions in the fifty years since gaining independence, and have forgotten

some of our customs. Certainly the concept of exploration, even treaty-making, as a strictly individual, commercial, enterprise, is not Lochlann. We have been making unconscious assumptions about each other. The fact that our two groups have kept so much apart on this voyage has helped maintain those errors. I offer apology."

It was not relevant, but Tolteca was driven to snap, "Why should you apologize to me? I'm doubtless also to blame."

Raven smiled. "But I am a Commandant of the Oakenshaw Ethnos."

As if that bland purr had attracted him, a cat stuck his head out of the Lochlanna's flowing surcoat sleeve. Zio was a Siamese tom, big, powerful, and possessed of a temper like mercury fulminate. His eyes were cold blue in the brown mask. "Mneowrr," he said remindingly. Raven scratched him under the chin. Zio tilted back his head and rumbled his motor.

Tolteca gulped down an angry retort. Let the fellow have his superiority complex. He struck a cigaret and smoked in short hard puffs. "Never mind all that," he said. "What's the immediate problem?"

"You must correct the wrong impression among your men. My troop goes out first."

"What? If you think—"

"In combat order. The spacemen stand by to lift ship if anything should go awry. When I signal all clear, then you and Captain Utiel may emerge and make your speeches. But not before."

For an instant, Tolteca could find no words. He could only stare.

Raven waited, impassive. He had the Lochlanna build, the result of many generations of a planet with one-fourth again the standard surface gravity: though tall for one of his own race he was barely of average Namerican height. Thick-boned and thick-muscled, he moved like his own

cat, a gait which had always impressed Tolteca's people as slippery and sneaking. His head was typically long, with the expected dysharmonically broad face, high cheekbones, hook nose, sallow skin which looked youthful because genetic drift had eliminated the beard. His hair, close cropped, was a cap of midnight, and his brows met above the narrow green eyes. His clothes were not precisely gaudy, but the republican simplicity of Nuevamerica found them barbaric—high-collared blouse, baggy blue trousers tucked into half boots, surcoat embroidered with twined snakes and flowers, a silver dragon brooch. Even aboard ship, Raven wore dagger and machine pistol.

"By all creation," whispered Tolteca at last. "Do you think we're on one of your stinking campaigns of conquest?"

"Routine precautions," said Raven.

"But—the first expedition here was...was welcomed like— Our own advance boat, the pilot, he was feted till he could hardly stagger!"

Raven shrugged, earning an indignant look from Zio. "They've had almost one standard year to think over what the first expedition told them. We're a long way from home in space, and even longer in time. Twelve hundred years since the breakup of the Commonwealth isolated them. The whole Empire rose and fell while they were alone on that one planet. Genetic and cultural evolution have done strange work in less time."

Tolteca dragged on his cigaret and said roughly: "Judging by all the data, those people think more like Namericans than you do."

"Indeed?"

"They have no armed forces. No police, even, in the usual sense; public service monitors is the best translation of their word. No—well, one thing we have to find out is the extent to which they do have a government. The first expedition had too

much else to learn, to establish that clearly. But beyond doubt, they haven't got much."

"Is this good?"

"By my standards, yes. Read our Constitution."

"I have done so. A noble document, for your planet." Raven paused, scowling. "If this Gwydion were remotely like any other lost colony I've ever heard of, there would be small reason for worry. Common sense alone, the knowledge that overwhelming power exists to avenge any treachery toward us, would stay them. But don't you see, when there is no evidence of internecine strife, even of crime...and yet they are obviously not simple children of nature...I can't guess what *their* common sense is like."

"I can," clipped Tolteca, "and if your bully boys swagger down the gangway first, aiming guns at people with flowers in their hands, I know what that common sense will think of us."

Raven's smile was oddly charming on that gash of a mouth. "Credit me with some tact. We will make a ceremony of it."

"Looking ridiculous at best—they don't wear uniforms on Gwydion—and transparent at worst—for they're no fools. Your suggestion is declined."

"But I assure you—"

"No, I said. Your men will debark individually, and unarmed."

Raven sighed. "As long as we are exchanging reading lists, Sir Engineer, may I recommend the articles of the expedition to you?"

"What are you slinking toward now?"

"The *Quetzal*," said Raven patiently, "is bound for Gwydion to investigate certain possibilities and, if they look hopeful, to open negotiations with the folk. Admittedly you are in charge of that. But for obvious reasons of safety, Captain Utiel has the

last word while we are in space. What you seem to have forgotten is that once we have made planetfall, a similar power becomes mine."

"Oa! If you think you can sabotage—"

"Not at all. Like Captain Utiel, I must answer for my actions at home, if you should make complaint. However, no Lochlanna officer would assume my responsibility if he were not given corresponding authority."

Tolteca nodded, sickly. He remembered now. It hadn't seemed important. The Company's operations took men and valuable ships ever deeper into this galactic sector, places where humans had never been even at the height of the Empire. The hazards were unpredictable, and an armed guard on every vessel was in itself a good idea. Then a few old women in culottes, on the Policy Board, decided that plain Namericans weren't good enough. It had to be soldiers born and bred. In these days of spreading peace, more and more Lochlanna units found themselves at loose ends and hired out. They kept pretty much aloof, on ship and in camp, and so far it hadn't worked out badly. But the *Quetzal*—

"If nothing else," said Raven, "I have my own men to think of, and their families at home."

"But not the future of interstellar relations?"

"If those can be jeopardized so easily, they don't seem worth caring about. My orders stand. Please instruct your men accordingly."

Raven bowed. The cat slid from his nesting place, dug claws in the coat, and sprang up on the man's shoulder. Tolteca could have sworn that the animal sneered. The door closed behind them.

A while Tolteca stood motionless. The music reached a crescendo, reminding him that he had wanted to enjoy approach. He glanced back at the screen. The ship's curving path

had brought the sun Ynis into scanner view. Its radiance stopped down by the compensator circuits, it spread corona and great wings of zodiacal light like nacre across the stars. The prominences must be spectacular too, for it was an F8 with a mass of about two Sols and a corresponding luminosity of almost fourteen. (Being middle Population One, it was still young enough to be in the main sequence.) But at its distance, 3.7 Astronomical Units, only the disc could be seen, covering a bar ten minutes of arc. All in all, a most ordinary star. Tolteca twisted dials until he found Gwydion again.

The planet had gained apparent size, though he could still only see it as a chipped turquoise coin. Later the cloud bands and aurora should become visible, but no continents. While the first expedition had reported Gwydion to be Earthlike in astonishing detail, it was about 10% smaller and denser—to be expected of a younger world, formed when there were more heavy elements in the universe—and thus possessed less total land area, all divided into islands and archipelagos, great shallow oceans making the climate mild from pole to pole. . . Here came its moon, 1600 kilometers in diameter, 96,300 kilometers in orbital radius, swinging from behind the disc like a tiny hurried firefly.

Tolteca considered the backdrop with a sense of eeriness. This close, the Nebula's immense cloud of dust and gas showed us little more than a region where stars were fewer and paler. Even nearby Rho Ophiuchi was blurred. Sol, of course, was hidden even from telescopes, an insignificant yellow dwarf 200 parsecs beyond that veil, which its light would never pierce. *I wonder what's happening there,* thought Tolteca. *It's long since anyone went to Earth.*

He recollected what Raven had ordered, and cursed Raven.

The pasture where the *Quetzal* had



been asked to settle its giant cylinder was about five kilometers south of Instar. From the gangway Tolteca had looked widely across rolling fields, divided by hedges into meadows of intense blossom-starred green, plowland where the first delicate shoots of grain went like a breath across brown furrows, orchards and copses and scattered homes made tiny by distance. The River Camlot gleamed between trees which might almost have been poplars; Instar was red tile roofs above enclosed flower gardens. All roads across the landscape were paved, but narrow and leisurely winding. Sometimes, Tolteca felt sure, a detour had been made to preserve an ancient tree or the lovely upswelling of a hill. Eastward the land flattened, sloping down to dikes which cut off view of the sea; westward it climbed, until forested hills rose abruptly on that horizon with a few dim mountain peaks beyond, some of which looked volcanic. The sun hung just above them; you didn't notice how small it was, for it radiated too brightly and the total illumination was almost exactly one standard sol. Cumulus clouds loomed to southwest, and a low cool wind ruffled the puddles left by a recent shower.

"It is even more peaceful and beautiful than the finest places on my own planet," said Tolteca to Dawyd. "And Nuevamerica is considered extremely Earthlike."

"Thank you," replied the Gwydiona. "Though we can take little credit. The world was here, with its own intrinsic conditions, its native biochemistry and ecology, all eminently suited to human life. I understand that God wears a different face in most of the known cosmos."

"Uh—" Tolteca hesitated. "The local language, as recorded by the first expedition and learned by the second before starting out, was not altogether easy for him. Like Lochlanna, it derived from Anglic, whereas the Na-

mericans had always spoken Ispanyo. Had he quite understood that business with "God"? Somehow, it didn't sound conventionally religious. But then, the secular orientation of his own society made him liable to misinterpret any theological reference.

"Yes," he said after a moment. "The variations in so-called terrestroid planets are not great from a percentage standpoint, but to human beings they make all the difference. On one continent of my own world, for example, settlement was impossible until a certain common genus of plant had been eradicated. It was harmless most of the year, but the pollen it broadcast in spring happened to contain a substance identical with botulinus toxin."

Dawyd gave him a startled look. Tolteca wondered what he had said wrong. Had he misused some local word? Of course he'd had to use his own name for the poison... "Eradicate?" murmured Dawyd. "Do you mean destroyed? Entirely?" Catching himself, slipping back into the normal serene manner with what looked like practiced ease: "Well, let us not discuss technicalities right away. It was doubtless one of the Night Faces." He took his hand from the steering rod long enough to trace a sign in the air.

Tolteca leaned back, a trifle puzzled. The first expedition had emphasized in its reports that the Gwydiona were not superstitious, though they employed a vast amount of ceremony and symbolism. To be sure, the first expedition had landed on a different island; but it had found an identical culture wherever men dwelt. (And failed to understand why men occupied only the region between latitudes 25° and 70° N., although many other spots looked equally pleasant. There had been so much else to learn.) When the *Quetzal's* advance boat arrived, Instar had been suggested as the best place for the spaceship merely because it was one of the larger

towns and possessed a college with an excellent reference library.

The ceremonies of arrival weren't overwhelming, either. All Instar had turned out, men, women, and children with garlands, pipes, and lyres; and visitors had come from afar. After the formal speeches, music was played and a ballet presented, a thing with masks and thin costumes whose meaning escaped the outworlders but which made a stunning spectacle. That was all. It broke up in general cordiality; not the milling, backslapping, handshaking kind of welcome that Namericans would have given, but neither the elaborate and guarded courtesy of Lochlann. Individuals had talked in a friendly way to individuals, given invitations to stay at private homes, asked eager questions about the outside universe. And at last most of the people walked back again; but each newcomer got a ride in a small, exquisite electric automobile.

Only a nominal guard of crewmen, and a larger detachment of Lochlanna, remained with the ship. No offense had been taken at Raven's wariness, but Tolteca still smoldered.

"You will indeed abide at my house?" asked Dawyd.

Tolteca bowed in his seat. "It would be an honor, Sir—" He paused. "Forgive me, but I am not sure what your title is."

"I belong to the Simnon family."

"No. I knew that. I mean, your... not your name, but what you do."

"I am a physician, of that rite which heals by songs as well as medicines." (Tolteca wondered how much he was misunderstanding.) "I also have charge of a dike patrol and instruct youth at the college."

"Oh." Tolteca was disappointed. "I thought— You are not in the government, then?"

"Why, yes. I said I am in the dike patrol. What else had you in mind?

Instar employs no Year-King or— No, that cannot be what you meant." Dawyd frowned with thought.

Tolteca watched him, as if to read what could not be said. The Gwydiona all had that basic similarity which results from a very small original group and no later immigration. The first expedition had reported a legend that their ancestors were no more than a man and two women, one dark and one blonde, survivors of an atomic blast lobbed at the colony by one of those fleets which went a-murdering during the Breakup; but records were admittedly vague. Be that as it may, this case was untypical in that there had been no degeneracy: rather, a refinement. The first generations had followed a careful program of outbreeding. To this day, the bearers of observable hereditary defects, including low intelligence and nervous instability, were sterilized, though not otherwise discriminated against.

Dawyd was a pure caucasoid, which alone proved how old his nation must be. He was tall, slender, still supple in middle age. His yellow hair, worn shoulder length, was grizzled, but the blue eyes required no contact lenses and the suntanned skin was firm. The face, clean-shaven, high of brow and strong of chin, bore a straight nose and gentle mouth. His clothes were green tunic and white cloak, golden fillet, leather sandals, a locket about his neck which was gold on one side and black on the other. A triskele was tattooed on his forehead, but gave no effect of savagery.

His language had not changed much from Anglic, the Lochlanna had learned it without difficulty. Doubtless, as usual, printed books and sound recordings had tended to stabilize it. But whereas Lochlann barked, grunted, and snarled, thought Tolteca, Gwydion trilled and sang. He had never heard such voices before.

"Ah, yes," said Dawyd. "I think I grasp your concept. Yes, my advice is often asked, even on worldwide questions. That is my pride and my humility."

"Excellent. Well, Sir Councillor, I—"

"But councillor is no...no calling. I said I was a physician."

"Wait a minute, please. You were not formally chosen in any way to... guide, advise, control—?"

"No. Why should I be? A man's reputation, good or ill, spreads. Finally others may come from halfway around the world, to ask his opinion of certain proposals." Dawyd added shrewdly, "Bear in mind, far-friend, that our whole population numbers a mere ten million, and that we have both radio and aircraft, and travel a great deal between our islands."

"But who, then, is in charge of public affairs?"

"Oh, some communities employ a Year-King, or elect presidents to manage their local meetings, or appoint an engineer to handle routine. It depends on regional tradition. Here in Instar, we lack such customs, save that we crown a Dancer each solstice, to bless the year."

"That isn't what I mean, Sir Physician. Suppose a...oh, a project, like building a new road; or a policy like, well, deciding whether to have regular relations with other planets... suppose this vague group of wise men you speak of—men who depend simply on a reputation for wisdom—suppose they decide such a question, one way or another. What happens next?"

"Then, normally, it is done as they have decided. Of course, all hear about it beforehand. If the issue is at all important, there will be much public discussion. But naturally, men will lay more weight on the suggestions of those known to be wise."

"So everyone agrees with the final decision?"

"Why not? The matter has been threshed out and the most logical answer arrived at. To be sure, a few are always unconvinced or dissatisfied. But being human, and therefore rational, they accommodate themselves to the general will."

"And—uh—funding such an enterprise?"

"That depends on its nature. A purely local enterprise, like building a new road, is carried out by the people of the community involved, with feasting and merriment each night. For larger and more specialized projects, coin may be needed, and then its collection depends on local custom. We of Instar let the Dancer go about with a sack, and all contribute as much as is reasonable."

Tolteca gave up for the time being. He was no further along than the anthropologists of the first expedition. Except, maybe that he was mentally prepared for some such answer as he'd received, and could accept it. If you had a society with a simple economic structure (automation helped marvelously in that respect, provided that the material desires of the people remained modest) and if you had a homogeneous population of high average intelligence and low average nastiness, well, then perhaps the ideal anarchic state was possible.

And it must be remembered that anarchy, in this case, did not mean amorphousness. The total culture of Gwydion was as intricate as any that men had ever evolved. Which in turn was paradoxical, since advanced science and technology usually dissolved traditions and simplified interhuman relationships. However—

Tolteca asked cautiously: "What effect do you believe contact with other planets would have on your people? Planets where things are done in radically different ways?"

"I don't know," replied Dawyd, thoughtful. "We would need more

data, and a great deal more discussion, before even attempting to foresee the consequences. I do wonder if a gradual introduction of new modes may not prove best for you."

"For us?" Tolteca was startled.

"Remember, we have lived here a long time. We know the Aspects of God or Gwydion better than you, even as we should be most careful before venturing to your home."

Tolteca could not help saying, "It's strange that you never built spaceships. I gather that your people preserved, or reconstructed, all the basic scientific knowledge of their ancestors. As soon as you had a large enough population, enough surplus wealth, you could have coupled a thermonuclear power plant to a gravity beamer and a secondary-drive pulse generator, built a hull around the ensemble, and—"

"No!"

It was almost a shout. Tolteca jerked his head around to look at Dawyd. The Gwydiona had gone quite pale.

Color flowed back after a moment. He relaxed his grip on the steering rod. But his eyes were still rigidly focused ahead of him as he answered: "We do not use atomic energy. Sunpower, waterpower, and windpower, stored in electric accumulators, are sufficient. No vehicle need be much larger or much more powerful than this car, and no community needs many vehicles."

Then they were in the town. Dawyd guided the automobile through wide straight avenues which seemed almost to contradict the vine-covered houses and peaked red roofs, the parks and splashing fountains. Tolteca noticed only one large building, a massive structure of fused stone, rearing above all chimneys with an incongruous grimness. Dawyd stopped just beyond a bridge which spanned the river in a graceful serpent shape. He had calmed down, and smiled at his guest.

"My abode. Will you enter?"

As they stepped from the bubble, a tiny scarlet bird flew from the eaves, settled on Dawyd's finger, and warbled joy. He murmured to it, grinned half awkwardly at Tolteca, and led the way to his front door, which was screened from the street by a tall bush with star-shaped leaves new for the spring season. The door's lock was sturdy but unused; Tolteca recalled again that Gwydion was apparently without crime, that its people had been hard put to understand the concept when the outworlders interviewed them. Having opened the door, Dawyd turned about and bowed very low.

"O guest of the house, who may be God, most welcome and beloved, enter. In the name of joy, and health, and understanding; beneath Ynis and She and all the stars; fire, food, fleet, and light be yours." He crossed himself, and reaching up he drew a cross on Tolteca's brow with his finger. The ritual was obviously time-worn, and yet he did not gabble it, but spoke with vast seriousness.

Entering, Tolteca noticed that the door was only faced with wood. Basically, it was a slab of steel, set in walls that were—under the stucco—two meters thick and of reinforced concrete. The windows were broad, sunlight streaming through them to glow on polished wood flooring; but each window had steel shutters. He wondered why, then forgot the matter as he watched Dawyd kneel down to light a candle before a niche. The shrine held a metal disc, half gold and half black with a bridge between, the Yin and Yang of immemorial antiquity. And still it was flanked by books, full-size and micro, with titles like, *Diagnostic Application of Bioelectric Potentials*.

Dawyd got up. "Please be seated, friend of the house. My wife went into the Night—" he hesitated—"She died, several years ago, and only one

of my daughters is unwedded. She danced for you this day, and thus is late. When she comes, we will take food."

Tolteca looked at the indicated chair. It was designed as rationally as any Namerican lounge, but made of bronze and tooled leather. He touched a fyfot recurring in the design. "I understand that all your ornamentation is symbolic. Would you explain this to me, as an example?"

"That is the Burning Wheel," answered Dawyd, "which is to say the Sun, Ynis, and all suns in the universe. The Wheel also represents Time. Thermodynamic irreversibility, if you are a psychicist," he added with a chuckle. "The interwoven vines are crisflowers, which bloom in the first haygathering season of our year and are therefore sacred to that Aspect of God called the Green Boy. Thus together they mean Time, the Destroyer and Regenerator. The leather is from the wild arcas, which belongs to the autumnal Huntress Aspect, and when she is linked with the Boy symbol it reminds us of the Night Faces and, at the same time, that the Day Faces are their other side. Bronze, being an alloy, manmade, says by forming the framework that Man embodies the meaning and structure of the world. However, since bronze turns green on corrosion, it also signifies that all structure vanishes at last, but into new life—"

He stopped and laughed. "You don't want a sermon!" he exclaimed. "Look here, do sit down. Go ahead and smoke. We already know about that custom. We can't do it ourselves—a bit of genetic drift, nicotine is too violent a poison for us—but it doesn't bother me in the least if you do. Coffee grows well on this planet, would you like a cup, or would you rather try our beer or wine? Now that we are alone for a while, I have about ten to the fiftieth questions to ask!"

That evening Raven left Instar, where he had prowled around looking, and wandered along the river road to the sea dikes. A couple of his men followed, in the byrnies and conical helmets of full battle gear; rifles were slung on their shoulders. Behind them the western hills lifted black against a sky which blazed and smoldered with gold; the river was like running metal, the light seemed to fill the air and touch every separate grass blade. Ahead, beyond trees, the eastern sky had become imperially blue and the first stars trembled.

Raven moved unhurriedly, without fear of being caught in the dark. Not on a planet with an 83-hour rotation period. He stopped for a moment at a long wooden dock where double-ended fishing craft lay tied. The sheds nearby were as solidly built as very house in town, and as gracious.

"Ketch rigged," he pointed out. "Small auxiliary engines, but I dare say those are used only when it is absolutely necessary."

"And otherwise sail?" Kors, long and gaunt, spat between his front teeth. "Now why do such a fool thing, Commandant?"

"It's more esthetically pleasing," said Raven.

"More work, though, sir," offered young Wildenvey. "I sailed a bit myself, during the Ans campaign. Just keeping all those damn ropes untangled—"

Raven grinned. "Oh, I agree. Quite. But you see, as far as I can gather, the Gwydiona don't think that way. Not like any of us visitors. A Namerican is concerned only with getting his work done, regardless of whether it really should be accomplished, and then with getting his recreation done—both with maximum bustle. A Lochlanna tries to make his work and his games approach some abstract ideal; and when he fails, he's apt to give up completely and jump over into brutishness. But they don't seem

to make such distinctions here. They say, 'Man goes where God is,' and it seems to mean that work and play and art and everything else aren't divided up, no distinction is made, it's all part of one harmonious whole. So they'll fish from sailboats with elaborately carved figureheads, each element in the pattern having a dozen different symbolic overtones; and doubtless they'll take musicians along; and they'll claim that the total effect, food-gathering plus pleasure plus artistic accomplishment plus I don't know what, is more efficiently achieved than if all those things were in neat little compartments."

He shrugged and resumed his walk. "They might be right," he finished.

"I don't know why you're worried, sir," said Kors. "They're as harmless a pack of loonies as I ever met. I swear they haven't any machine more powerful than a light tractor, no weapon more dangerous than a bow."

"The first expedition reported that they don't even go hunting, except when they must for food or to protect their crops." Raven continued for a while, unspeaking. Only the scuff of boots, chuckling river and murmur in the leaves and slowly rising thunders beyond the dike, stirred that silence. The young five-pointed leaves of a bush which grew everywhere around gave a faint green fragrance to the air. Then, far off and winding down the hills, a bronze horn blew, calling antlered cattle home.

"That's what makes me afraid," said Raven.

Thereafter the men did not venture to break his wordlessness. Once or twice they passed a Gwydiona, who hailed them gravely, but they didn't stop. When they reached the dike, Raven led the way up a staircase. The wall stretched for kilometers, set at intervals with slim towers. It was high and massive, but the long curve of it and the stone facing made it graceful. The river poured through a

gap, past a beach, into a dredged channel and a crescent-shaped bay whose waters tumbled and roared, molten in the sunset light. Raven drew his surcoat close about him; a wind blew here, chill and wet and smelling of salt. There were many gray sea birds in the sky.

"Why did they build this?" wondered Kors.

"Close moon. Big tides," said Wild-envey.

"They could have moved further up in the hills. They've room enough, for hellfire's sake. Ten million on an entire planet!"

Raven gestured at the towers. "I inquired," he said. "Tidepower generators in those. Furnish most of the local electricity. Shut up."

He stood staring out to a night horizon. The waves ramped and the sea birds mewed. His eyes were bleak with thought. Finally he sat down, took a wooden flute from his sleeve and began to play, absent-mindedly, as something to do with his hands. The music grieved, minor key beneath the wind.

Kors' bark recalled him to the world. "Halt!"

"Be still, you oaf," said Raven. "It's her planet, not yours." But his palm rested casually on the butt of his pistol as he rose.

The girl came walking along the diketop, which was planted with a velvetlike pseudomoss. She was perhaps twenty-three standard years old, slim, dressed in a white tunic and wildly fluttering blue cloak. Her hair was looped in thick yellow braids, pulled back from her forehead to show a conventionalized bird tattoo. Beneath dark brows, her eyes were violet, set far apart; the mouth and the heartshaped face were grave, but the nose tiptilted and faintly dusted with freckles. She led a boy, perhaps four, by the hand: a little male version of herself, who had been skipping but sobered when he spied the Lochlanna. Both were barefoot.

"At the crossroads of the elements, greeting," she said. Her husky voice sang the language, like all Gwydiona voices.

"Salute, peacemaker." Raven found it simplest to translate his home phrases.

"I came up here to dance for the sea," she told him, "but heard a music that called."

"Are you a shooting man?" asked the boy.

"Byord, hush!" The girl colored with embarrassment.

"Yes," laughed Raven, "you might call me a shooting man."

"But what do you shoot?" asked Byord. "Gol! Targets? Can I shoot a target?"

"Perhaps later," said Raven. "We have no targets with us at the moment."

"Mother, he says I can shoot a target! Pow! Pow! Pow!"

Raven lifted one brow. "I thought chemical weapons were unknown on Gwydion, milady," he said, as off-hand as possible.

She answered with faint distress: "That other ship, which came in winter...the men aboard it also had, what did they call them, guns. They explained and demonstrated. Since then, probably every small boy on the planet has imagined— Well, No harm done, I am sure." She ruffled Byord's hair, smiling.

"Ah...I hight Raven, a Commandant of the Oakenshaw Ethnos, Windhome Moutains, Lochlann."

"And you other souls?" asked the girl.

Raven waved them back. "Followers. Sons of yeomen on my father's estate."

She was puzzled that he excluded them, but accepted it as an alien custom. "I am Elfavy," she said, accenting the first syllable. She flashed a grin: "My son Byord you already know! His surname is Varstan, mine is Simnon."

"What?— Oh, yes, I remember.

Gwydiona wives retain their family name, sons take the father's, daughters the mother's. Am I correct? Your husband—"

She looked outward. "He drowned there, one storm last fall," she answered quietly.

Raven did not say he was sorry, for his culture had its own attitudes toward death. He couldn't help wondering aloud, tactless: "But you said you danced for the sea."

"He is of the sea now, is he not?" She continued regarding the waves, where they swirled and shook foam loose from their crests. "How beautiful it is tonight."

Then, swinging back to him, altogether at ease: "I have just had a long talk with one of your party, a Miguel Tolteca. He is staying at my father's house, where Byord and I now live."

"Not precisely one of mine," said Raven, suppressing offendedness.

"Oh? Wait...yes, he did mention having some men along from a different planet."

"Lochlann," said Raven. "Our sun lies near theirs, both about 50 light-years hence in that direction." He pointed past the evening star to the Hercules region.

"Is your home like his Nuevamerica?"

"Hardly," for a moment Raven wanted to speak of mountains which rose sheer into a red-sun sky, trees dwarfed and gnarled by wind, moorland, ice plains, oceans too dense and bitter with salt for a man to sink. He remembered a peasant's house, its roof held down by ropes lest a gale blow it away, and he remembered his father's castle gaunt above a glacier, and hoofs ringing in the courtyard, and he remembered bandits and burned villages and dead men gaping around a smashed cannon.

But she would not understand. Would she?

"Why do you have all the shooting things?" exploded from Byord. "Are

there bad animals around your farms?"

"No," said Raven. "Not many wild animals at all. The land is too poor for them."

"I have heard...that first expedition—" Elfavy grew troubled again. "They said something about men fighting other men."

"My profession," said Raven. She looked blankly at him. Wrong word, then. "My calling," he said, though that wasn't quite right either.

"But killing *men!*" she cried.

"Bad men?" asked Byord, round-eyed.

"Hush," said his mother. "'Bad' means when something goes wrong, like the cynwyr swarming down and eating the grain. How can men go wrong?"

"They get sick," Byord said.

"Yes, and then your grandfather heals them."

"Imagine a situation where men often get so sick they want to hurt their own kind," said Raven.

"But horrible!" Elfavy traced a cross in the air. "What germ causes that?"

Raven sighed. If she couldn't even visualize homicidal mania, how explain to her that sane, honorable men found sane, honorable reasons for hunting each other?

He heard Kors mutter to Wildenvey: "What I said, Guts of sugar candy."

If that were only so, thought Raven, he could forget his own unease. But they were no weaklings on Gwydion. Not when they took open sailboats onto oceans whose weakest tides rose fifteen meters. Not when this girl could visibly push away her own shock, face him, and ask with friendly curiosity—as if he, Raven, should address questions to the sudden apparition of a sabertoothed weaselcat:

"Is that the reason why your people and the Namericans seem to talk so little to each other? I thought I

noticed it in the town, but didn't realize who came from which group."

"Oh, they've done their share of fighting on Nuevamerica," said Raven dryly. "As when they expelled us; we had divided their planet into fiefs, a century ago. They were aided by the fact that Lochlann was simultaneously fighting the Grand Alliance—but still, it was well done of them."

"I don't see why—well, no matter. We will have time enough to discuss all this. You are going into the hills with us, are you not?"

"Why, yes, if... What did you say? You too?"

Elfavy nodded. Her mouth quirked upward. "Don't be so horrified, far-friend. I will leave Byord with his aunt and uncle, even if they do spoil him terribly." She gave the boy a brief hug. "But the group does need a dancer, which is my calling."

"Dancer?" choked Kors.

"Not *the* Dancer. He is always a man."

"But—" Raven relaxed. He even smiled. "In what way does an expedition into the wilderness require a dancer?"

"To dance for it," said Elfavy. "What else?"

"Oh...nothing. Do you know precisely what this journey is for?"

"You have not heard? I listened while my father and Miguel talked it over. You see, planets where men can live without special equipment are rare and far between. The explorers from Nuevamerica would like a base on Gwydion, to refuel their ships, make needful repairs, rest in greenwoods." Elfavy gave Kors and Wildenvey a surprised look, not knowing why they both laughed aloud. Raven himself would not have interrupted her naive recital for money.

She brushed the blown yellow hair off her brow and resumed, "Well, of course all our people must decide the matter. But it can do no harm meanwhile to look at possible sites for



such a base, can it? Father proposed an uninhabited valley some days' march inland, beyond Mount Granis. The journey afoot would be pleasant, much could be shown to you and discussed en route, and we would return well before Bale time."

She frowned the faintest bit. "I am not certain it is wise to have a foreign base so near the Holy City. But that can always be argued later." Her laughter trilled forth. "Oh, dear, I do ramble, don't I?" She caught Raven's arm, impulsively, and tucked her own under it. "But you have seen so many worlds, you can't imagine how we here have all looked forward to meeting you. The wonder of it! The stories you can tell us, the songs you can sing us!"

She dropped her free hand to Byord's shoulder. "Wait till this little chatterbird gets over his shyness with you, far-friend. If we could only harness his questions to a generator, we could illuminate all Instar!"

"Awww," said the boy, wriggling free.

They began to walk along the dike-top, almost aimlessly. The two soldiers followed. The rifles on their backs stood black against a cloud like roses. Elfavy's fingers slipped down from Raven's awkwardly held arm—men and women did not go together thus on Lochlann—and closed on the flute in his sleeve. "What is this?" she asked.

He drew it forth. It was a long piece of darvawood, carved and polished to bring out the grain. "I am not very good with this," he said. "A man of rank is expected to have some artistic skills. But I am only a younger son, which is why I wander about seeking work for my guns, and I have not had much musical instruction."

"The sounds I heard were—" Elfavy searched after a word. "They spoke to me," she said finally, "but not in a language I knew. Will you play that melody again?"

He set the flute to his lips and piped the notes, which were cold and sad. Elfavy shivered, catching her mantle to her and touching the gold-and-black locket at her throat. "There is more than music here," she said. "That song comes from the Night Faces. It is a song, is it not?"

"Yes. Very old. From Earth, they say, centuries before men had even left the Home. We still sing it on Lochlann."

"Can you put it into Gwydiona for me?"

"Perhaps. Let me think." He walked for a while more, turning phrases in his head. A military officer must also be adept in the use of words, and the two languages were close kin. Finally he sounded a few bars, lowered the flute, and began:

*"The wind doth blow today, my love,*

*And a few small drops of rain.  
I never had but one true love,  
And she in her grave was lain.*

*'I'll do as much for my true love  
As any young man may;  
I'll sit and mourn all at her grave  
For a twelvemonth and a day.'*

*The twelvemonth and a day being up,*

*The dead began to speak:*

*'Oh, who sits weeping on my grave  
And will not let me sleep?' —"*

He felt her grow stiff, and halted his voice. She said, through an unsteady mouth, so low he could scarce hear: "No. Please."

"Forgive me," he said in puzzlement, "if I have—" What?

"You couldn't know. I couldn't." She glanced after Byord. The boy had frisked back to the soldiers. "He was out of earshot. It doesn't matter, then, much."

"Can you tell me what is wrong?" he asked, hopeful of a clue to the

source of his own doubts.

"No." She shook her head. "I don't know what. It just frightens me somehow. Horribly. How can you live with such a song?"

"On Lochlann we think it quite a beautiful little thing."

"But the dead don't speak. They are *dead!*"

"Of course. It was only a fantasy. Don't you have myths?"

"Not like that. The dead go into the Night, and the Night becomes the Day, is the Day. Like Regan, who was caught in the Burning Wheel, and rose to heaven and was cast down again, and was wept over by the Mother—those are Aspects of God, they mean the rainy season that brings dry earth to life and they also mean dreams and the waking from dreams, and loss-remembrance-recreation, and the transformations of physical energy, and— Oh, don't you see, it's all one! It isn't two people separate, become nothing, desiring to be nothing, even. It mustn't be!"

Raven put away his flute. They walked on until Elfavy broke from him, danced a few steps, a slow and stately dance which suddenly became a leap. She ran back smiling and took his arm again.

"I'll forget it," she said. "Your home is very distant. This is Gwydion, and too near Bale time to be unhappy."

"What is this Bale time?"

"When we go to the Holy City," she said. "Once each year. Each Gwydiona year, that is, which I believe makes about five of Old Earth's. Everybody, all over the planet, goes to the Holy City maintained by his own town. It may be a dull wait for you people, unless you can join us. . . . Perhaps you can!" she cried, eagerness washing out the last terror.

"What happens?"

"God comes to us."

"Oh." He thought of dionysiac rites on certain backward planets and asked with great care: "Do you see

God, or feel Vwi?" The last word was a pronoun; Gwydiona employed an extra gender, the universal.

"Oh, no," said Elfavy. "We are God."

The dance ended in a final exultant jump, wings fluttering iridescent and the bird head turned skyward. The pipe and drum tape fell silent. The dancer's plumage swept the grass as she bowed. She vanished into a canebrake. The audience, seated crosslegged, closed eyes for an unspeaking minute, which Tolteca thought was a more graceful tribute than applause.

He looked around again as the ceremony broke up. It didn't seem quite real to him, yet, that camp should be pitched, supper eaten, and the time come for rest and sleep, while the sun had not reached noon. The long day, of course: Gwydion was just past vernal equinox; but even at its mild and rainy midwinter, daylight lasted a couple of sleeps.

The effect hadn't been so noticeable at Instar. The town employed an auroral generator to give soft outdoor illumination, and went about its business. Organized during that period, the survey expedition had marched into the hills at dawn. Already one day had passed on the trail, with two campings—and one night, where the moon needed little help from the travelers' flashbeams, and now another forenoon. Sometime tomorrow they ought to reach the upland site which Dawyd had suggested might make a spaceport.

Tolteca could feel the tiredness due rough kilometers in his muscles, but he wasn't sleepy yet. He stood up, glancing over the camp. Dawyd had selected a good spot, a meadow in the forest. The half-dozen Gwydiona who accompanied him chattered gaily as they banked the fire and spread out sleeping bags. One man, standing watch against possible carnivores, carried a longbow. Tolteca

had seen what that weapon could do, when a hunter had brought in an arcas for meat. Nonetheless, he wondered why everyone had courteously refused those firearms the *Quetzal* brought as gifts.

The ten Namerican scientists and engineers who had come along were in more of a hurry to bed down. Tolteca chuckled, recalling their dismay when he announced that this trip would be on shank's mare. But Dawyd was right, there was no better way to learn an area. Raven had also joined the group, with two of his men. The Lochlanna seemed incapable of weariness, and their damned slithering politeness never failed them, but they were always a little apart from the rest.

Tolteca sauntered past the canebrake, along a side path. Though no one lived in these hills, the Gwydiona often went up here for recreation, and small solar-powered robots maintained the trails. He had not quite dared hope he would meet Elfavy. But when she came around a flowering tree, the heart leaped in him.

"Aren't you tired?" he asked, lame-tongued, after she stopped and gave greeting.

"Not much," she answered. "I wanted to stroll a while before sleep. Like you."

"Well, let's go into partnership."

She laughed. "An interesting concept. You have so many commercial enterprises on your planet, is this another one? Hiring out to take walks for people who would rather sit at home?"

Tolteca bowed. "If you'll join me, I'll make a career of that."

She flushed and said quickly: "Come this way. If I remember this neighborhood since the last time I was here, it has a beautiful view not far off."

She had changed her costume for a plain tunic. Sunlight came through leaves to touch her lithe dancer's body; the hair, loosened, fell in

waves down her back. Tolteca could not find the words he really wanted, nor could he share her easy silence.

"We don't do everything for money on Nuevamerica," he said, afraid of what she might think. "It's only, well, our particular way of organizing our economy."

"I know," she said. "To me it seems so...impersonal, lonely, each man fending for himself—but that may just be because I am not used to the idea."

"Our feeling is that the state should do as little as possible," he said, earnest with the ideals of his people. "Otherwise it will get too much power, and that's the end of freedom. But then private enterprise must take over; and it must be kept competitive, or it will in turn develop into a tyranny." Perforce he used several words which Gwydiona lacked, such as the last. He had introduced them to her before, during long discussions at Dawyd's house, when they had tried to understand each other's viewpoints.

"But why should the society, or the state as you call it, be opposed to the individual?" she asked. "I still don't grasp what the problem is, Miguel. We seem to do much as we please, all the time, here on Gwydion; and yet it all works out for mutual benefit, money is only an economic convenience and its possession does not give a man power over his fellows."

"You are all reasonable people," said Tolteca. "Nor have you any need to curb violence. You hardly know what anger is. And hate...another word which isn't in your language. Hate is to be *always* angry with someone else." He saw shock on her face, and hurried to add: "Then we must contend with the lazy, the greedy, the unscrupulous—Do you know, I begin to wonder if we should carry out this project. It may be best that your planet have nothing to do with any others. You are too good; you could

be too badly hurt."

She shook her head. "No don't think that. Obviously, we are different from you. Perhaps genetic drift has caused us to lose a trait or two otherwise common to mankind. But the difference isn't that great, and it doesn't make us superior. After all, you came to us. We never managed to build spaceships."

"Never chose to," he corrected her.

He remembered a remark of Raven's one time in Instar: "It isn't natural for humans to be gentle and rational all the time. They've done great things here; they don't lack energy. But where does the excess energy go?" At the time, Tolteca had bristled. Only a professional killer would be frightened by total sanity, he thought. Now he began, unwilling, to see that Raven had asked a legitimate scientific question.

"We never chose to do many things," said Elfavy with a hint of wistfulness.

"I admit wondering why you don't at least colonize the uninhabited parts of Gwydion."

"We stabilized the population by general agreement, several centuries ago. More people would only destroy nature."

They emerged from the woods again. Another meadow sloped upward to a cliff edge. The grass was strewn with white flowers; here and there a tree stood, slender, full of gold blossoms; the common bush of star-shaped leaves grew everywhere about, its buds swelling, the air heady from their odor. Beyond this spine of the hills lay a deep valley and then the mountains rose, clear and powerful against the sky.

Elfavy swept an arm in an arc. "Should we crowd out this?" she asked.

Tolteca thought of his own brawling unrestful folk, the forests they had already raped, and made no answer.

The girl stood a moment, frowning,

on the clifftop. A west wind blew strongly up here, straining the tunic against her and tossing sunlit locks of hair. Tolteca caught himself staring so rudely that he forced his eyes away, across kilometers toward that gray volcanic cone named Mount Granis.

"No," said Elfavy, her tone stubborn, "I must not be smug. People did live here once. Just a few farmers and woodcutters, but they did maintain isolated homes. However, that is long past. Nowadays I don't believe we would occupy these regions even if it were safe. It would be wrong. All life has a right to existence, has it not? Men shouldn't wear more of a Night Face than they must."

Tolteca concentrated on the meaning with some difficulty, because the sound was so pleasant. Night Face—oh, yes, part of the Gwydiona religion. (If "religion" was the right word. "Philosophy" might be better. "Way of life" might be still more accurate.) Since they believed everything to be a facet of that eternal and infinite Oneness which they called God, it followed that God was also death, ruin, sorrow. Though they didn't say much, or seem to think much, about that side of reality. He remembered that their arts and literature, like their daily lives, were sunny, cheerful, completely logical once you had mastered the complex symbolisms. Even the pain and loss of one much beloved was mourned in a controlled manner which Raven admired but Tolteca had had trouble understanding.

"I don't believe your folk could harm nature," he said. "You work with it, make yourselves part of it."

"That's the ideal," laughed Elfavy, "but I'm afraid practice has no more statistical correlation with preaching on Gwydion than anywhere else in the universe." She knelt and began to pluck the small white flowers. "I shall make a garland of jule for you," she said. "A sign of friendship, since

the jule blooms when the year is being reborn. Now that's a nice harmonious thing for me to do, isn't it? And yet if you asked the plant, it might not agree!"

"Thank you," he said, overwhelmed.

"The Bird Maiden had a chaplet of jule," she said. By now he realized that the retelling of symbolic myths was a standard conversational gambit here, like a Lochlanna's inquiry after the health of your father. "That is why I wore bird costume this time. It is her season, and today is the Day of the River Child. When the Bird Maiden met the River Child, he was lost and crying. She carried him home and gave him her crown." She glanced up. "It is a seasonal myth," she explained: "the end of the rainy season, lowland floods, then sunlight and the blooming jule. Plus all those moral lessons the elders are always quacking about, plus about a hundred other possible interpretations. The entire story is too complicated to tell on a warm day, even if the episode of the Riddling Tree is one of our best poems. But I always like to dance the story."

She fell silent, her hands busy in the grass. For lack of anything else, he pointed to one of the budding bushes. "What's this called?" he asked.

"With the five-pointed leaves? Oh, baleflower. It grows everywhere."

"So I've noticed. It must have quite a lot of mythology, then."

Elfavy stopped. She looked up at him. The violet eyes seemed, for an instant, almost blind. "No," she said.

"What? But I thought... I thought everything means something on Gwydion, as well as being something. Usually it has many different meanings—"

"This is only baleflower." Her voice grew thin. "Nothing else."

Tolteca pulled himself up short. Some taboo—no, surely not that, the Gwydiona were even freer from arbi-

trary prohibitions than his own people. He resolved to have the plant studied, botanically and chemically, when he got back to the ship. But don't tell anyone....

The girl finished her work, jumped to her feet and flung a wreath about his neck. "There!" she laughed. "No, hold still, it's caught on one ear— Ah, good."

He gestured to the one in her hand. "Aren't you going to put that on yourself?"

"Oh, no. A jule garland is always for someone else. This is for Raven."

"What?" Tolteca stiffened.

Again she flushed and looked past him toward the mountains. "I got to know him a little in Instar. I drove him around, showing him the sights. Or we walked."

Tolteca thought of all the times in that long moonlit night when she had not been at home. He said, "I don't believe Raven is your sort," and heard his voice go rough.

"I don't understand him," she whispered. "And yet in a way I do. Maybe. As I might understand a storm."

She started back toward camp. Tolteca said bitterly, "I should think you, of everyone alive, would be immune to such cheap glamor. Soldier! Hereditary aristocrat!"

"Those things I don't comprehend," she said, her eyes still averted. "To kill people, or make them do your bidding, as if they were machines— But it isn't that way with him. Not really."

They went down the trail in stillness, boots thudding next to sandals. At last she murmured, "He lives with the Night Faces. All the time. I can't even bear to think of that, and yet he endures it."

*Enjoys it*, Tolteca wanted to growl. But he realized he had been backbiting, and held his peace.

They returned to find most of the party asleep, eyelids padded against daylight. The sentry saluted them with a raised arrow. Elfavy con-

tinued to the edge of camp, where the three Lochlanna had spread their bedrolls. Kors snored, a gun in his hand; Wildenvey looked too young and helpless for his gory shipboard brags. Raven was still awake. He squatted on his haunches and frowned at a sheaf of photographs.

As Elfavy approached, his grin sprang forth, he seemed quite honestly pleased. "Well, this is a happy chance," he called. "Will you join me? I have a pot of tea on the grill over the fire."

"No, thank you. I like that tea stuff of yours, but it would keep me from sleeping." Elfavy stood before him, looking down at the ground. The wreath dangled in her hand. "I only—"

"Never come between an Oakenshaw and his tea," said Raven. "Ah, there, Sir Engineer."

Elfavy's face burned. "I only wanted to see you a moment," she faltered.

"And I you. Someone mentioned former habitation in this area, and I noticed traces on a ridge near here. I went up there with a camera." Raven flowed erect and fanned out his self-developing films. "It was a thorp once, several houses and out-buildings. Not much left now."

"No. Long abandoned." The girl lifted her wreath and lowered it again.

Raven gave her a steady look. "Destroyed," he told her.

"Oh? Oh, yes. I have heard this region was dangerous. The volcano—"

"No natural catastrophe," said Raven. "I know the signs. My men and I cleared away the brush with a flash pistol and dug in the ground. Those buildings had wooden roofs and rafters, which burned. We found two human skeletons, more or less complete. One had a skull split open, the other a corroded iron object between its ribs." He raised the pictures toward her eyes. "Do you see?"

"Oh." She stepped back. One hand crept to her mouth. "What—"

"Everyone tells me there is no record of men killing men on Gwydion," said Raven. "It's not merely rare, it's unknown. And yet that thorp was attacked and burned once."

Elfavy gulped. Anger rushed into Tolteca, thick and hot. "Look here, Raven," he snapped, "you may be free to bully some poor Lochlanna peasant, but—"

"No," said Elfavy. "Please."

"Did all the other homes up here suffer a like fate?" Raven flung the questions at her, not loudly but nonetheless like bullets. "Were the hills deserted because it was too hazardous to live in such isolation?"

"I don't know." Elfavy's voice lifted with a raggedness it had not borne until now. "I... have seen ruins, here and there... nobody knows what happened." A sudden yell: "*Everything* isn't recorded in history, you know! Do you know every answer to every question about your own planet?"

"Of course not," said Raven. "But if this were my world, I'd at least know why all the buildings are constructed like fortresses."

"Like what?"

"You know what I mean."

"Why... you asked me that once before... I told you," she stammered. "The strength of the house, the family—a symbol—"

"I heard the myth," said Raven. "I was also assured that no one has ever believed those myths to be literal truth, only poetic expressions. Your charming tale about Anren who made the stars has not prevented you from having an excellent grasp of astrophysics. So what are you guarding against? What are you afraid of?"

Elfavy crouched back. "Nothing." The words rattled from her. "If, if, if there were anything... wouldn't we have better weapons against it... than bows and arrows? People get hurt—in accidents, by sickness and old age—they die, the Night has them— But

nothing else! There can't be!"

She whirled about and fled.

Tolteca stepped toward Raven, who stood squinting after the girl. "Turn around," he said. "I'm going to beat the guts out of you."

Raven laughed, a metallic noise. "How much combat karate do you know, trader's clerk?"

Tolteca dropped a hand to his gun. "We're in another culture," he said between his teeth. "A generation of scientific study won't be enough to map all its thought processes. If you think you can go trampling freely on these people's feelings, no more aware of what you're doing than a bulldozer with a broken autopilot—"

They both felt the ground shiver. An instant afterward the sound reached them, booming down the sky.

The three Lochlanna were on their feet in a ring, weapons aimed outward, without seeming to have moved. Elsewhere the camp stumbled awake, men calling to each other through thunders.

Tolteca ran after Elfavy. The sun seemed remote and heatless, the explosions rattled his teeth together, he felt the ground vibrations in his bones.

The noise died away, but echoes flew about for seconds longer. Dawyd joined Elfavy and threw his arms around her. A flock of birds soared up, screaming.

The physician's gaze turned westward. Black smoke boiled above the treetops. As Tolteca reached the Simmons, he saw Dawyd trace the sign against misfortune.

"What is it?" cried the Namerican. "What happened?"

Dawyd looked his way. For a moment the old eyes were without recognition. Then he answered curtly, "Mount Granis."

"Oh." Tolteca slapped his forehead. The relief was such that he wanted to howl his laughter. Of course! A volcano cleared its throat, after a century or two of quiet. Why in the

galaxy were the Gwydiona breaking camp?

"I never expected this," said Dawyd. "Though I daresay our seismology is less developed than yours."

"Our man made some checks, and didn't think we would have any serious trouble if we built a spaceport here," said Tolteca. "That wasn't a real eruption, you know. Just a bit of lava and a great deal of smoke."

"And a west wind," said Dawyd. "Straight from Granis to us."

He paused before adding, almost absent-mindedly: "The site I had in mind for your spaceport is protected from trouble of this kind. I checked the airflow patterns with the central meteorological computer at Bettwis. It is a mere unlucky happenstance that we should be at this exact spot, this very moment. Now we must run, and may fear give speed to us."

"From a little smoke?" asked Tolteca incredulously.

Dawyd held his daughter close. "This is a planet of middle Population One," he said. "Rich in heavy metals. That smoke and dust, when it gets here, will include enough such material to kill us."

By the time they got in motion, jogging southward along a sparsely wooded ridge, the cloud had overshadowed them. Kors looked up past a dim red ball of sun, estimating with an artilleryman's eye. His lantern jaw worked a moment, as if chewing sour cud, before he spoke:

"We can't go back the way we came, Commandant. That muck'll fall out all over those parts. We've got to keep headed this way and hope we can get out from under. Ask one of these yokels if he knows a decent south-bound trail."

"Must we have a trail?" puffed Wildenvey. "Let's cut right through the woods."

"Listen to the for-Harry's-sake heathdweller talk!" jeered Kors. "Porkface, I grew up in the Ershaw. Have you ever tried to run

through underbrush?"

"Save your breath, you two," advised Raven. He loped a little faster until he joined Dawyd and Elfavy at the head of the line. Grass whispered under his boots, now and then a hob-nail rang on a stone and sparks showered. The sky was dull brown, streaked with black, the light from it like tarnished brass and casting no shadows. The only bright things in the world were an occasional fire-spit from Mount Granis, and Elfavy's flying hair.

Raven put the question to her. He spaced his words with his breathing, which he kept in rhythm with his feet. The girl replied in the same experienced manner. "In this direction, all paths converge on the Holy City. We ought to be safe there, if we can reach it soon enough."

"Before Bale time?" exclaimed Dawyd.

"Is it forbidden?" asked Raven, and wondered if he would use his guns to enter a refuge tabooed.

"No...no rule of conduct... But nobody goes there outside Bale time!" Dawyd shook his head, bewildered. "It would be a meaningless act."

"Meaningless—to save our lives?" snapped Raven.

"Unsymbolic," said Elfavy. "It would fit into no pattern." She lifted her face to the spreading darkness and cried, "But what sense would it make to breathe that dust? I want to see Byord again!"

"Yes. So. So be it." Dawyd shut his mouth and concentrated on making speed.

Raven's eyes, watching the uneven ground, touched the girl's quick feet and stayed there. Not until he tripped on a vine did he remember exactly where he was. Then he swore and forced himself to think of the situation. Without analytical apparatus, he had no way to confirm that volcanic ash was as dangerous as Dawyd claimed; but it sounded reasonable, on a planet like this. The first expedition

had been warned about many vegetable species which were poisonous to man simply because they grew in soil loaded with heavy elements. It wouldn't take a lot of inhaled metallic material to destroy you: radioactives, arsenates, perhaps elemental mercury liberated from its oxide by heat. A few gulps and you were done. Dying might take a while, prolonged by the medics' attempts to get a hopelessly big dose out of your body. Not that Raven intended to watch his own lungs and brain go rotten. His pistol could do him a final service. But Elfavy—

They stopped to rest at the head of a downward trail. One of the Gwydiona protested through a dried-out throat: "Not the Holy City! We'd destroy the whole meaning of Bale time!"

"No, we wouldn't." Dawyd, who had been thinking as he trotted, answered with an authority that pulled all their reddened eyes to him. "The eruption at the moment when we happened to be downwind was an accident so improbable it was senseless. Right? That Night Face called Chaos." Several men crossed themselves, but they all nodded. "If we redress the situation—restore the balance of events, of logical sequence—by entering the Focus of God (in our purely human *persona*, at that, which makes our act a parable of man's conscious reasoning powers, his science)—what could be more significant?"

They mulled it over while the gloom thickened and Mount Granis boomed at their backs. One by one, they murmured agreement. Tolteca whispered to Raven, in Ispanyo: "Oa, I do believe I see a new myth being born."

"Yes. They'll doubtless bring one of their quasi-gods into it, a few generations hence...while preserving an accurate historical account of what really happened!"

"But by all creation! Here they are, running from an unnecessarily horri-



ble death, and they argue whether it would be artistic to shelter in this temple spot!"

"It makes more sense than you think," said Raven somberly. "I remember once when I was a boy, my very first campaign in fact. A civil war, the Bitter Water clan against my own Ethnos. We boxed a regiment of them in the Stawr Hills, expecting them to dig in. They wouldn't, because there were brave men's graves all around, the Danoorra who fell three hundred years ago. They came out prepared to be mowed down. When we grasped the situation, we let them go, gave them a day's head start. They reached their main body, which perhaps turned the course of the war. But that victory would have cost us too much."

Tolteca shook his head. "I don't understand you."

"You wouldn't."

"Any more than you would understand why men died to pull down the foreign castles on your planet."

"Well, maybe so."

Raven wondered how much lethal dust he was already breathing. Not enough to matter, yet. The air was still clean in his nostrils, he could still see far across hills and down forested slopes. The heavy particles and stones were not dangerous. It was the finely divided material, slowly settling over many hectares, which could kill men.

Like a mind-reader, Dawyd said: "The Holy City will be almost ideal for us. Airflow patterns protect it from the ash—it lies right under the Steeps of Kolumkill, and never gets a south wind. The site was chosen with that in mind, even though our local volcanoes very rarely erupt. We shall have to wait there till the next heavy rain, which may take a few days at this season. That will carry down the last airborne dust leach from the soil what has fallen, wash the poison into the rivers and so into the sea, safely diluted. The City has ample food sup-

plies, and I see no reason why we should not avail ourselves of them."

He stood up. "But first we must get there," he finished. "Does everyone have his breath back?"

The rest of the journey was little remembered. They went at a dogtrot, along well-kept trails, under cool leaves; they halted a few minutes at a time when it seemed indicated; but toward the end men lurched along in each other's arms. Three Namericans collapsed. Dawyd had poles chopped and raincoats spread to make litters for them. No one complained at the burden. But maybe that was because no breath was left to complain.

When he entered the Holy City, Raven himself scarcely saw it. He retained enough strength to spread a bedroll for Elfavy, who sprawled quietly down and passed out. He brought a cup of water for Dawyd, who lay on his back and stared with eyes emptied of awareness. He even washed the grime and sweat from himself before crawling into his own bag. But then darkness clubbed him.

When he awoke, it took a few seconds before he knew his own name, and a bit longer to fix his location. He rallied those drilled reflexes by which he could deny to himself that he was stiff and aching. Shadow from a wall covered him, but he looked straight up to the stars. Had he slept so long? The sky was utterly clear; men were indeed safe in this place. The constellations glittered in unfamiliar patterns. He could barely recognize that one they called The Plowman on Lochlann: its distortion made him feel cold and alone. The Nebula, dimming some parts of the sky and blotting out others, was somehow less alien.

He left his bag, crouched in the dark and opened the packsack pillow with fingers too schooled to need light. Quickly he dressed. Dagger and pistol made a comforting drag on his flanks. He threw a wide-sleeved tunic over the drab route clothes, for it

flaunted the crests of his family and nation, and glided between men still unconscious into the open.

The night was very quiet. He stood in a forum, if it could be so named. There was no paving in the Holy City, but thick pseudomoss lay cool and full of dew under his feet. On every side rose white marble buildings, long and low, fluted delicate porticos upholding roofs where figures danced on friezes. They had wide, doorless main entrances atop mossy ramps, but the windows were mere slits. Colonnades and wings knitted them together into a labyrinthine unity. Behind them stood a ring of towers, airily slender, with bronze cupolas that must show a mellow green by daylight. The entire place was surrounded by an amphitheater or whatever you wanted to call it: low moss-carpeted tiers enclosing this miniature dell like the sides of a chalice. Trees grew thickly on its top.

Down here there were no trees; but many formal gardens—rather, a single, reticulated one, interwoven with the houses and the towers—held beds of Terran violets and thornless roses, native jule and sunbloom and baleflower and much else which Raven didn't recognize. Southward, those cliffs called the Steeps of Kolumkill, which the party had had to go around, shouldered against the stars.

He was able to see much detail, for the moon she was rising in the west. Its retrograde path would take it over the sky and through half a cycle of phases during half a night period. Already it was a white semicircle, a degree in angular diameter, filling the hollow with unreal light.

A fountain tinkled in the middle of the forum. Raven crossed to its little moss-grown bowl and swallowed until his mummy gullet felt alive again. The water gurgled back down a whimsical drainpipe, a grotesque fish face. Well, why shouldn't there be humor in the geometric center of

sacredness? thought Raven. The people of Gwydion laughed more than most, not raucously like a Namerican or wolfishly like a Lochlanna, but a gentle mirth which found something comical in even the grandest things... The water must come from some woodland spring, it had a wild taste.

He heard a noise and whirled about, one hand on his gun. Elfavy entered the moonlight. "Oh," he said stupidly. "Are you awake, milady?"

She laughed. "No. I am sound asleep in my bed in Instar." Treading close: "I woke up an hour ago or more, but didn't want to move. Not for a day, at least! Then I saw you here, and—" Her voice trailed off.

Raven directed his heartbeat to slow down. It obeyed poorly. "Someone should keep watch," he said. "May as well be me."

"No need, far-friend. There are no dangers here."

"Wild animals?"

"Robots keep them off. Other robots maintain the grounds." She pointed to a little wheeled machine weeding a rosebed with delicate tendrils.

Raven grinned. "Ah, but who maintains the robots?"

"Silly! An automatic unit, of course. Every ten years, local years, I mean, our engineers hold a midwinter ceremony where they inspect the facilities and bring in fresh supplies."

"I see. And otherwise no one ever comes here except at—uh—Bale time?"

She nodded. "No reason to. Shall we look around? Walking might get the cramp out of my legs." She could have been offering to show him any local curiosum.

Their feet fell noiseless on the moss. The buildings looked like faerie work, there under the brutal mass of Kolumkill; but as he reached a doorway, Raven saw that their walls were fused stone, thick and strong as all Gwydiona architecture. Light came

from fluoros, recessed in the high ceiling: probably solar-battery powered, he thought. It was dim, but there was little to see anyhow—a gracious anteroom, archways opening on corridors.

"We mustn't go very deeply in," said the girl, "or we will get lost and blunder around for hours till we find our way out. Look." She pointed down a hall, toward an intersection whence five other passages radiated. "That is only the edge of the maze."

Raven touched a wall. It yielded to his fingers, the same rubbery gray substance that felt so pleasant under his feet. "What's this?" he asked. "A synthetic elastomer? Does it line the whole interior?"

"Yes," said Elfavy. Her tone grew indifferent. "Nothing in here, really. Let's go up in one of the towers, then you can see the total pattern."

"A moment, if you grant." Raven opened one of the doors which lined the nearest corridor. It was of typical steel construction, though coated with the universal soft plastic, and had an inside bolt. The room beyond was ventilated through a slit-window; a toilet and water tap were the only furnishings, but a heap of small shapeless bags filled one corner. "What's in those?" asked Raven.

"Food supplies, sealed in plastiskins," Elfavy answered. "An artificial food, which keeps indefinitely till opened. I'm afraid you won't find it very exciting, but it is nourishing."

"You seem to live rather austere at Bale time," said Raven. He watched her from the edge of an eye.

"It is no time to worry about material needs. Instead, you grab a sack of food and slit it open with your thumbnail when hungry, drink from a tap or fountain when thirsty, flop down anywhere when sleepy."

"I see. But what is the important thing you do, to which keeping alive is so incidental?"

"I told you." She left the room with a quick nervous stride. "We are God."

"But when I asked you what you meant by that, you said you couldn't explain."

"I can't." She evaded his glance. Her voice was not perfectly level. "Don't you see, it goes beyond language. Any language. We employ several on Gwydion, you realize. Science is one, painting is another, music, another, choreography another and so on. According to what you have told me, this seems to be the only planet where myth was also developed, deliberately and systematically, as still a different language—not by primitives who confused it with the scientific or the common-sense concepts, but by people trained in semantics, who knew that each language describes one single facet of reality, and wanted myth to help them talk about something for which all the others were inadequate. You can't believe, for instance, that mathematics and poetry are interchangeable!"

"No," said Raven.

She brushed back her tousled hair and went on, eager now: "Well, what happens at Bale time could only be described by a fusion of every language, including those no human being has yet imagined. And such a super-language is impossible, because it would be self-contradictory."

"Do you mean that at Bale time you perceive, or commune with, total reality?"

They came out into the open again. She hastened across the forum, through the barred shadows of a colonnade to the spires beyond. He had never seen anything so beautiful as the sight of her running in the moonlight. She pulled up short at a tower doorway, it cast a darkness over her and she said from the darkness: "That's merely another set of words, *liatha*. Not even a label. I wish you could be here yourself and know!"

They started upward. A padded ramp wound around small rooms. It was dimly lit and stuffy. Raven asked, after a silence: "What was it you

called me just now?"

"What?" He couldn't be sure, but he thought her face was stained with quick color.

"*Liatha* I don't know that word."

Her lashes fluttered down. "Nothing," she mumbled. "An expression."

"Ah, let me guess." He wanted to make a joke, to suggest that it meant oaf, barbarian, villain, swinedog but remembered that Gwydiona had no such terms. Since she looked at him with enormous expectant eyes he must blunder, "Darling, beloved—"

She stopped, shrinking back against the wall. "You said you didn't know!"

The discipline of a lifetime kept him walking. When she rejoined him he made himself say, lightly, through a clamor: "You are most kind, peacemaker, but I don't need any further flattery than the fact that you have time to spare for me."

"There will be time enough for everything else," she whispered, "after you are gone."

The highest room, just under the roof, was the only one which possessed a true window, rather than a slit. Moonlight cataracted past its bronze grille. The air was warm, but that light made Elfavy's hair seem to crackle with frost. She pointed out at the intricate interlocking of labyrinth, towers, and flowerbeds. "The hexagons inscribed in circles mean the laws of nature," she began in a small voice, "their regularity enclosed in some greater scheme. It is the sign of Owan the Sunsmith, who—" She stopped. Neither of them had been listening. They searched each other's faces under the fenced-off moon.

"Must you go?" she asked finally.

"I have made promises," he said.

"But after they are fulfilled?"

"I don't know." He considered the stranger sky. "I've known people from one place, one culture, who tried to settle into another. It rarely works."

"It might. If there were willingness. A Gwydiona... for example...

could be happy even on, well, on Lochlann."

"I wonder."

"Will you do something for me? Now."

His pulses jumped. "If I can, milady."

"Sing me the rest of that song. The one you sang when we first met."

"But you couldn't—"

"I would like to try again. Please."

He hadn't brought his flute, but he sang low in the chilly night:

*"— 'Tis I, my love, sits on your  
grave*

*And will not let you sleep;*

*For I crave one kiss of your  
clay-cold lips,*

*And that is all I seek.'*

*'You crave one kiss of my clay-  
cold lips;*

*But my breath smells earthy  
strong;*

*If you have one kiss of my clay-  
cold lips*

*Your time will not be long' —"*

"No," said Elfavy. She gulped and hugged herself, seeking warmth. "I'm sorry."

He recalled again that there was no tragic art on Gwydion. None whatsoever. He wondered why. He wondered what a *Lear* or an *Agamemnon* or an *Old Men At Centauri* might do to her. Or the real thing, even: Vard of Helledale rebelling for a family honor he didn't really believe in, defeated and slain by his own comrades; young Brand who broke his regimental oath, gave up friends and wealth and the mistress he loved more than the sun, to go live in a peasant's hut and tend his insane wife.

He wondered if he, himself, was healthy enough within the skull to live on Gwydion.

The girl rubbed her eyes. "Best we go down again," she said. "Others will soon be awake. They don't know what has become of us."

"We'll talk later," said Raven.  
 "When we aren't so tired."  
 "Of course," she said.

Festival dwelt in Instar. Tolteca was reminded of Carnival Week on Nuevamerica—not the commercialized feverishness of the cities, but masquerade and street dancing in the hinterlands, where folk still made their own pleasure. Oddly enough, for a people otherwise so ceremonious, the Gwyndiona celebrated the time just before Bale by scrapping all formalism. Courtesy, honesty, nonviolence seemed too ingrained to lose. But men shouted and made horseplay, women dressed with a lavishness that would have been snickered at anytime else in the planet's long year, schools became playgrounds, each formerly simple meal was a banquet, and quite a few families broke out the wine and got humanly drunk. A garland of roses, jule, and pungent margwy herb hung on every door; no hour of day or night lacked music.

And so it was all over this world, thought Tolteca: in every town on every inhabited island, the year had turned green and the people were soon bound for their shrines.

He came striding down a gravel road. The sun stood at late morning and the boy Byord walked with a hand in his. Far and holy above western forests, the mountain peaks dreamed.

"What did you do then?" asked Byord, breathless.

"We stayed in the City till it rained," said Tolteca. "A couple of days, which we passed with games and stories. Then when it was safe, we proceeded to our goal, inspected it—a fine site indeed—and at last we came back here. We got in the day before yesterday, remember?"

"Gol! What's the City like?"

"Don't you know?"

"Course not 'cept they told us a little about it at school. I wasn't born, last Bale time. I'm going with my

mother because I'm big enough."

"It's very beautiful," said Tolteca. He wondered how children this age fitted into a time of religious meditation if that was what it was, and how they kept so well afterward the secret of what happened.

"Tell me 'bout planets", said Byord. "When I get big, I want to be a spaceman. Like you."

"Why not?" said Tolteca. Byord could get as good a scientific education here as anywhere in the known galaxy. By the time he was old enough, the astro academies would doubtless be eager to enroll Gwydiona cadets. Gwydion itself would be more than a refueling stop, a decade hence. A people that gifted couldn't help themselves, they were certain to become curious about the universe (as if they weren't already so interested that only the intelligence of their questions made the number endurable) —and, yes, to influence it. The Empire had fallen, human society was once more in flux. What better ideal for the next civilization than Gwydion?

*And why count myself out?* thought Tolteca. *When we build our spaceports here, they'll require Namerican administrators, engineers, factors, liaison officers. Why shouldn't I become one, and live my life under Ynis and She?*

He looked down at the tangled head near his waist. He'd always shuddered at the notion of acquiring a ready-made family. But why not? Byord was a polite and talented boy who still remained very much a boy. It would be a pleasure to take him fishing. Even today's outing—undertaken frankly to ingratiate one Miguel Tolteca with Elfavy and Simon—had been a lot of fun.

When earlier, one of the Namerican spacemen had expressed a desire to settle here, Raven had warned him he'd go berserk in one standard year. But what did Raven know about it? The prediction was doubtless true

enough for him. Lochlanna society, caste-ridden, haughty, ritualistic and murderous has indeed nothing in common with Gwydion. *But Nueveramerica now—oh, I don't pretend I wouldn't miss the lights and tall buildings, once in a while, but what's to prevent me and my family from taking vacation trips there? As for the rest, here are a calm, rational, but merry people with an ideal of beauty, uncrowded in a nature which has never been trampled on. And not static, either. They have their scientific research, innovations in the arts, engineering projects. Look how they welcome the idea of regular interstellar contact. How could I fail to fall in love with Gwydion.*

*Specifically, with—*Tolteca shut that thought off. He came from a civilization where all problems were practical problems. So let's not moon about, but rather take the indicated steps to get what we want. Since Byord was pestering him for yarns of other planets, he reminisced aloud, with some editing, and the rest of their walk passed quickly.

They entered the town. It looked deserted all at once. Where people had milled about a few hours ago, they now seemed to be indoors. Here and there a man hurried from one place to another, carrying some burden. It was quiet beneath the sun, but with an underlying murmur, voices behind walls.

Byord broke free and skipped in the street. "We're going soon, we're going soon," he caroled.

"How do you know?" asked Tolteca. He had been told long ago that there was no set date for Bale time.

Every freckle grinned. "I know, Adult Miguel! Aren't you comin' too?"

"I think I better stay and take care of your pets," said Tolteca. Byord maintained the usual small-boy zoo of bugs and amphibia.

"There's Granther! Hey, Granther!" Byord broke into a run. Dawyd,

emerging from his house braced himself. When the small cyclone had struck him and been duly hugged, he pushed it toward the entrance.

"Go on inside, now," he said. "Your mother's making ready. She has to wash at least a few kilos of dirt off you and pack your lunch, before we start."

"Thanks, Adult Miguel!" Byord whoozed through the door.

Dawyd chuckled. "I hope you aren't too exhausted," he said.

"Not at all," Tolteca answered. "I enjoyed it. We went upstream to the House of the Philosophers. I never thought a place devoted to abstract thinking would include picnic grounds and a carousel."

"Why not? Philosophers are human too, I'm told. It is refreshing for them to watch the children, romp with them...and perhaps a little respect for knowledge rubs off on the youngsters." Dawyd started down the street. "Would you like to accompany me? You being a technical man, this may interest you."

"Are you leaving now?" Tolteca fell into step.

"Yes. The signs have become clear, even to me. Older people are not so sensitive; the young adults have been wild all morning." Dawyd's eyes glittered, and his lined brown face held less than its normal serenity.

"It is about ten hours on foot to the Holy City," he added after a moment. "Less for a man unencumbered by children and aged. If you should, yourself, feel the time upon you, please do come after us."

Tolteca drew a long breath, as if to smell the tokens. The air was alive with the blooming of a hundred flowers, trees, bushes, vines; nectar-gathering insects droned in flooding sunlight. "You never told me what the signs are," he reminded.

At other times, Dawyd had been a little uneasy at such queries, and changed the subject—which was simple enough with so much to talk:

about, twelve hundred years of separate history. Now the physician laughed aloud. "I can't tell you," he said. "I know, that is all. How do buds know when to unfold?"

"But haven't you ever, in the rest of the year, made any scientific study of—"

"Here we are." Dawyd halted on the riverbank. The central fortress loomed square and bleak above them. Dawyd led the way inside, where long halls were cool and shadowy. Another man passed, holding a monkey wrench. Dawyd waved at him. "A technician," he explained. "Making a final check on the central power controls. Everything vital, or potentially dangerous, is stored here during Bale time: all motor vehicles in a garage down that way for instance. My own task—"

He opened a door which gave on a huge and sunny room, gaily painted walls lined with cribs and playpens. A mobile robot stood by each, and a bright large machine murmured to itself in the center of the floor. Dawyd walked around, looking. "This is a routine and rather nominal inspection," he said. "The engineers have already overhauled everything. I have to certify the sanitation and pleasantness of the environment, but that has never been a problem."

"What is it for?" asked Tolteca.

"Do you not know? Why, to care for infants, those too young to accompany us to the Holy City. Byord is about as young as we ever dare take them. The hospital wing of this building has robots to nurse the sick and the very old during Bale time, but that is not under my supervision." Dawyd rubbed his chin. "What in the name of Chaos was I going to tell you? . . . Oh, yes. In case you have not already been warned. The entire building is locked up during Bale. Automatic shock beams are fired at anyone—anything—that comes within ten meters. Any moving object which actually touches the outside wall is

shot by the robots, flame blasts. Stay away from here!"

Tolteca stood quiet, for the last words had been alarmingly harsh.

Finally he ventured: "Isn't that rather extreme?"

"Bale time lasts about three of our days," said Dawyd, staring at a pen, the words tossed over his shoulder. "That's more than ten standard days. Plus the time to walk to the Holy City and back. We don't take chances."

"But—you've only carnivorous animals to fear, haven't you? A closed door, a barred window—"

Dawyd said, not entirely steadily: "We don't talk about it much. But Bale is, after all, when God comes, and God has Vwi Faces too. It isn't a safe time. Not everyone returns from the Holy City. Those who do, sometimes find that in spite of locks and shutters, there has been destruction. So we put our machines and our helpless people where nothing can enter till the time locks open themselves."

"Have you any idea," breathed Tolteca, "what causes . . . caused . . . the trouble?"

"No," said Dawyd. "We spend the entire time in the Holy City. It has been theorized, possibly the mountain ape is driven mad by the nearness of God, and comes down into the lowlands. Or conceivably, I don't know, conceivably we are not the only intelligent race on Gwydion. There are legends about underground creatures . . . But it is never a good idea to theorize in advance of the facts."

He continued his inspection with jerky movements, and in silence.

They were leaving the fortress when Tolteca suggested diffidently, "Perhaps we can observe what happens while you are gone."

Dawyd had cooled down again. "I doubt it," he said. "Many attempts were made in the past to plant cameras and other recording devices, but those were always evaded, or sometimes broken. I don't believe anything

untoward will happen. Nothing has, for many years. Even in my own boyhood, a raid on a deserted town was a rare event. You must not believe this is a major problem for us.

Tolteca struck a cigaret. The streets were now entirely bare, save for himself and the older man. And yet the sun drenched them in light. It sharpened their desolation.

"I'm afraid you will have a dull time, actually." Dawyd was becoming more and more himself. "Everybody gone, everything locked up, all over the inhabited planet. Maybe you would like to fly down to the southern hemisphere, where no one lives, and explore a little."

"I think we'll just stay put and correlate our data," said Tolteca. "We have a lot. When you return—"

"We won't be worth much for a few days," said Dawyd. "It isn't easy for mortal flesh, being God."

They reached his house. He stopped at the door, embarrassed. "I should invite you in, but—"

"I understand. Family rites." Tolteca smiled. "I'll just stroll down to the park at town's end. You'll all pass by there on your way and I'll wave farewell."

"Thank you, far-friend."

The door closed. Tolteca stood a moment, inhaling deeply, before he ground the cigaret butt under his heel and walked off between shuttered walls.

The park was gay with flowers. A few of the expedition lounged under shade trees, also waiting to observe the departure. Tolteca saw Raven, and clamped lips together. *I will not lose my temper.* He approached and gave greeting.

Raven answered with Lochlanna formality. The mercenary was in full dress for the occasion, blouse, trousers, tooled leather boots, embroidered surcoat. He stood massive next to a baleflower bush as tall as himself. Its buds were opening in a riot of crimson blooms, they smelled like sum-

mer meadows and like something else almost but not quite remembered. The Siamese cat Zio nestled in Raven's arms, he stroked the beast with one hand and got a purr for answer.

Tolteca repeated Dawyd's warning about the fortress. Raven's dark head nodded. "I knew that. I'd do the same in their place."

"Yes, *you* would," said Tolteca. He remembered his resolution and added impersonally, "Such over-destructiveness doesn't seem characteristic of the Gwydiona, though."

"This isn't a characteristic season. Every five standard years, for about ten standard days, something happens to them, and I'd feel easier if I knew what."

"My guess—" Tolteca paused. He hated to say it aloud. But finally: "A dionysiac religion."

"I can't swallow that," said Raven. "These people know all about photosynthesis. They don't believe magic makes the earth fertile."

"They might employ such ceremonies anyhow." Tolteca winced, thinking of Elfavy, but if he didn't say it himself, someone else would; and he was mature enough, he insisted, to accept a person on her own cultural terms. "Orgiastic."

"No," said Raven. "They aren't an orgiastic folk. Not at any time of year. That cool, reasonable, humorous mentality couldn't take a free-for-all seriously enough. Someone would be bound to start laughing and spoil the whole effect."

Tolteca was happy to agree and to suggest: "Well, then, drugs? Hallucinogens? A lot of cultures, you know, some of them quite scientific, believe that peyote or lysergic acid or whatever reveals otherwise inaccessible truths."

"If that were so in this case," Raven answered, "they'd use the stuff often-er than once in five years. Nor would they make such a mystery of their religion; they'd tell us in plain polite words, we aren't initiates and it's



none of our business what happens. Another trouble with your idea is, that they shun drugs so completely in their everyday life. Do you know, this past day is the first instance I've seen or heard or read of any Gwydiona even getting high on alcohol?"

"Well," flared Tolteca, "suppose you tell me what they do!"

"I wish I could." Raven's troubled gaze went to the baleflower. "You said something about having this analyzed. Did you?"

"Yes. Orilla checked it out for me. Nothing special about it."

"Nothing at all?"

"Oa, its perfume does contain an indole, among other compounds, probably to attract pollinating insects. But quite harmless. If you breathed it at an extremely high concentration, you might get a little dizzy, I suppose, but you couldn't get a real jag."

Raven scowled. "And yet this bush is named for the festival. And alone on the whole planet, has no mythology."

"Xinguez and I threshed that out. He checked his linguistic references, bearing in mind that Gwydiona stems from a rather archaic dialect of Anglic, closely related to the original English. That word *bale* can mean several things, depending on ultimate derivation. It can be a bundle; a fire, especially a funeral pyre; an evil or sorrow; and, more remotely and with a different original spelling, *Baal* is an ancient word for a god."

Tolteca tapped a fresh cigaret on his thumbnail and struck it with a rough motion. "You can imagine how the Gwydiona would intertwine such multiple meanings," he continued. "What elaborate symbolisms they'd develop. Those flowers have long petals aimed upward; a bush in full bloom would look rather like a fire, I imagine. The Burning Bush of primitive religion. Hence, maybe, the name *bale*. But that could also mean 'God' and 'evil'. And it blooms just at Bale

time. So because of all these coincidences, the baleflower symbolizes the Night Faces, the destructive aspect of reality...probably the most violent phase thereof, at that. Therefore, no one talks about it. The Gwydiona don't deny that evil and sorrow exist, but neither do they go out of their way to contemplate the fact."

"I know," said Raven. "In that respect, they're like Namericans."

"And in every other respect!" snapped Tolteca. "Including the fact that your bloody warlords are not going to carve up this planet!"

Raven turned his face to the engineer. So did Zio. It was disconcerting, for the cat's eyes were as cold and steady as the man's. "Are you quite certain," said Raven, "that these people are the same species as us?"

"Oa! If you think that just because they're too civilized to brew up war like you—" Tolteca advanced with fists cocked. *If Elfavy could only see!* it begged through the boiling within him. *If she could see what this animal really thinks of her!*

"Oh, quite possibly interbreeding is still feasible," said Raven. "We'll find that out soon enough."

Tolteca's fist leaped forward of itself.

Raven threw up an arm—Zio scampered to his shoulder—and blocked the blow. His hand slid down to seize Tolteca's own arm, his other hand got the Namerican's biceps, his foot scythed behind the oncoming ankles. Tolteca went on his back, pinned. The cat scuffled and clawed at him.

"That isn't necessary, Zio." Raven let go. Several other men hurried up. He waved them away. "It was nothing," he called. "I was only demonstrating."

Kors looked dubious, but at that moment someone yelled, "They're coming!" and attention went to the road.

Not that the parade was much to see. The Instar folk walked with an

easy, distance-devouring stride. They were lightly clad; they carried the one lunch they would need on the way, spare garments, and nothing else. But their laughter and singing and rapid chatter were like a bird-flock, like sunlight on a windy lake, and now and then one of them danced among hurtling children. So they went past, a flurry of bright tunics, sunbrowned limbs, garlanded fair hair, up into the hills and the Holy City.

But Elfavy broke from them. She ran to Raven, caught both the soldier's hands in her own and cried, "Come with us! Can't you feel it, *liatha*?"

He watched her a long while, his features wooden, before he shook his head. "No."

Tears blurred her eyes, and that wasn't the way of Gwydion either. "You can never be God, then?" Her head drooped, the yellow mane hid her face. Tolteca stood staring. What else could he do?

"If I might give you the power," said Elfavy, "I would give up my own." She sprang free, raised hands to the sun and shouted: "But it's impossible that you can't feel it! God is here already, everywhere, I see Vwi shining from you, Raven! You must come!"

He folded his hands together within the surcoat sleeves. "Will you stay here with me?" he asked.

"Always, always."

"Now, I mean. During Bale time."

"What? Oh—no, yes—you are joking?"

He said slowly: "I'm told the Night Faces are also revealed, sometimes, under the Steeps of Kolumkill. That not everyone comes home every year."

Elfavy took a backward step from him. "God is more than good," she pleaded. "God is *real*."

"Yes. As real as death."

"Great ylem!" exploded Tolteca. "What do you expect, man? Every-

body who can walk goes up there. Some must have incipient disease, or weak hearts, or old arteries. The excitement—"

Raven ignored him. "Is it a secret what happens, Elfavy?"

Her muscles untensed. Her laughter leaped forth. "No. It's only that words are such poor lame things."

"Well, tell me whatever words can, then. What do you do up there? What would a camera record?"

The blood drained from her face. She stood moveless. Eventually, out of a silence that grew and grew around her: "No. I can't."

"Or you mustn't?" Raven grabbed her bare shoulders so hard that his fingers sank in. She didn't seem to feel it, "You mustn't talk about it, or you won't, or you can't?" he roared. "Quick, now!"

Tolteca tried to stir, but his bones seemed locked together. The Instar people danced by, too lost in their joy to pay attention. The other Namericans looked indignant, but Wildenvey had drawn his gun, casually, and grinned in their faces. Elfavy shuddered. "I can't tell!" she gasped.

Raven's expression congealed. "You don't know," he said. "Is that it?"

"Let me go!"

He released her. She stumbled back against the bush. A moment she crouched, then drew a long breath. Tears caught sunlight on her cheeks, but she looked at the bruises on her skin, laughed, sprang forward and kissed Raven on his unmoving lips. "Wait for me, then, *liatha*!" She whirled, ran, and was lost in the throng.

Raven gazed after them till they dwindled among the fields.

Tolteca said through a taste like vomit: "Well, are you satisfied?"

"In a way." Raven didn't stir. His words fell flat.

"Don't make too many assumptions," said Tolteca. "She's in an ab-

normal state. Wait till she comes back and is herself again, before you get your hopes up."

"What?" Raven turned his head, blinking wearily, and seemed to recognize Tolteca only after a few seconds. "Oh. But you're wrong. That's not an abnormal state."

"Huh?"

"Your planet has seasons. Do you consider spring fever a disease? Is it unnatural to feel brisk on a clear fall day?"

"Wait a minute. What are you hinting at?"

"Never mind." Raven lifted his shoulders and let them fall, an old man's gesture. "Come, Sir Engineer, we may as well go back to the ship."

"But— Oa!" Tolteca's finger stabbed at the Lochlanna. "Do you mean you've guessed—"

"Yes. I may be wrong. Come, I say." Raven picked up Zio and became very busy making the cat comfortable in his sleeve.

"What?"

Raven started to go.

Tolteca caught him by the arm. Raven spun about. Briefly, the Lochlanna's face was drawn into such a snarl that the Namerican fell back. Raven clapped a hand to his dagger and whispered, "Don't ever do that again."

Tolteca braced his muscles. "What's your idea?" he demanded. "If Bale time really is dangerous—"

Raven leashed himself. "I see your thought. You want to go up there and stand by to protect her, don't you?"

"Yes. Suppose they do lie around in a comatose state. Some animal might sneak past the guard robots and—"

"No. You will stay down here. Everyone will. That's a direct order under my authority as military commander." Raven wet his lips. "Don't you see," he added, "this has been going on for more than a thousand years. By now they have evolved a system which minimizes the hazard.

Most of them survive. The ancestors alone know what delicate balance you may upset by blundering in there."

After another pause: "I've been through this sort of thing before. Sent out men according to the best possible plan, and then sat and waited, knowing my own attempt to help could only throw askew the statistics of their survival. It's even harder to deal with God, who can wear any face." He started trudging. "You'll stay here and wait, like the rest of us."

Tolteca stared after him. Thought trickled into his consciousness. *The hell I will.*

Raven awoke more slowly than usual. He glanced at the clock. Death and plunder, had he been eleven hours asleep? Like a drugged man, too. He still felt tired. Perhaps because there had been evil dreams, he couldn't remember exactly what but they had left a scum of sadness in him. He sat on his bunk edge, rested head in hands and tried to think. All he seemed able to do, though, was recall his father's castle, hawks nesting in the bell tower, himself about to ride forth and pausing to look down the mountainside, fells and woods and the peasants' niggard fields, then everything hazed into blue hugeness. The wind had tasted of glaciers.

He pushed the orderly buzzer. Kors' big ugly nose came through the door. "Tea," said Raven. He scalded his mouth on it, but enough sluggishness departed him that he could will relaxation. His brain creaked into gear. It wasn't wise after all, simply to wait till the Instar people came home. He'd been too abrupt with Tolteca; but his knowledge had been too new in him. Now he felt able to discuss it. Not that he wanted to. What right had a storeful of greasy Namerican merchants to such a truth? But it was certain to be discovered sometime, by some later expedition; maybe a decent

secrecy could be achieved, if an aristocrat made the first explanation.

Zio pattered after him as he left his cabin and went down a short passage-way to Tolteca's. He knocked, but got no answer. Well, try the saloon. . . . Captain Utiel sat there with a cigar and an old letter; he became aware of Raven by stages. "No, Commandant," he replied, "I haven't seen Sir Engineer Tolteca for, oh, two or three hours. He was going out to observe high tide from the dike-top, he said, and wouldn't be back for some time. Is it urgent?"

Raven stood motionless before answering: "Possibly. Did he have anyone with him? Or any instruments that you noticed?"

"No. Just a lunch and his sidearm."

Bitterness uncoiled in Raven. "Did you seriously believe he was making a technical survey?"

"Why. . . well. . . I didn't really think about it. . . . Well, he may simply have gone to admire the sight. The tide is impressive, you know."

Raven glanced at his watch. "Won't be high tide for hours."

Utiel sat up straight. "What's the matter?"

"Listen carefully," said Raven. "I am going out too. Stand by to lift ship. Keep someone on the radio. If I don't return, or haven't sent directions to the contrary, within—oh—thirty hours, go into orbit. In that event, and only in that event, one of my men will hand over to you a tape I've left in his care, with an explanation. Do you understand?"

Utiel rose. "I will not be treated in this fashion!" he barked.

"I didn't ask you that, Captain," said Raven. "I asked if you understood my orders."

Utiel grew rigid. "Yes, Commandant," he got out.

Raven went swiftly from the saloon. Once in the corridor, he ran. Kors gaped outside his cabin. "Fetch Wildenvey," said Raven. He clipped a

tape to his personal recorder, dictated, released it, and sealed its container with wax and his family signet. Wildenvey knocked as he was slipping a midget transceiver into his pocket. Raven gave him the tape, with instructions, and added: "See if you can find Miguel Tolteca anywhere about. Roust the whole guard to help. If you do, call me on the radio and I'll head back."

"Where are you going, sir?" asked Kors.

"Into the hills. I am not to be followed."

Kors curled his lip and spat between two long yellow teeth. The gob clanged on a disposer chute. "Very good, sir. Let's go."

"You stay here and take care of my effects."

"Any obscene child of impropriety can do that, sir," said Kors, looking hurt.

Raven glanced at the man and felt his own mouth drawn faintly upward. "As you will, then. But if ever you speak a word about this, I'll yank out your tongue with my bare fingers."

"Aye, sir." Kors opened a drawer and took out a couple of field belts, with supplies and extra ammunition in the pouches.

Raven set Zio carefully on the bunk and stroked him under the chin. Zio purred. He tried to follow the men. Raven pushed him back and closed the door in his face. Zio scolded him in absentia for several minutes.

Emerging from the spaceship, Raven saw that dusk was upon the land. The sky was deeply blue-black, early stars in the east, a last sunset cloud above the western mountains like a streak of clotting blood. He thought he could hear the sea bellow beyond the dike.

"We going far, Commandant?" asked Kors.

"Maybe as far as the Holy City," said Raven. "On the double."

"Holy muckballs!" Kors clipped a

flashbeam to his belt and began jogging.

The first hour they went through open fields. Here and there stood an outlying house, black under blackening heaven. They heard livestock low, and the whir of machinery tending empty farms. If no one ever came back, wondered Raven, how long would the robots continue their routines? How long would the cattle stay tame, the infants alive?

The road ended, the ground rose in waves, only a trail pierced through boles and brush. The Lochlanna halted for a breather. "You're chasing Tolteca, aren't you, Commandant?" asked Kors. "Shall I kill the son of a bitch when we catch him, or do you want to?"

"If we catch him," corrected Raven. "He has a long head start, even though we can travel a good deal faster. No, don't shoot unless he resists arrest." He stopped a second, to underline what followed. "Don't shoot any Gwydiona. Under any circumstances whatsoever."

He fell silent, slumping against a tree in total muscular relaxation, trying to blank his mind. After ten minutes they resumed the march.

Trees and bushes walled either side of the trail, leaves made a low roof over head. It was very dark, only the bobbing light of Kors' flash picked stones and dust into relief. Beyond the soft thud of their feet, they could hear rustlings, creakings, distant chirps and croaks, the cold tinkle of a brook. Once an animal screamed. The air cooled as they climbed, but it always remained mild, and it overflowed with odors. Raven thought he could distinguish the smells of earth and green growth, the damp smell of water when a rivulet crossed the trail, certain individual flower scents; but the rest was unfamiliar. Smell is the most evocative sense, and forgotten things seemed to move below Raven's awareness, but he couldn't identify

them. Overriding all else was the clear brilliant odor of baleflower. In the past few hours, every bush had come to full bloom.

Seen by daylight, tomorrow, the land would look as if it burned.

Time faded. That was a trick you learned early, from the regimental bronzes who instructed noblemen's sons. You needed it, to survive the waiting and the waiting of war without your sanity cracking open. You turned off your conscious mind. Part of it might revive during pauses in the march. Surely it was hard to stop at the halfway point for a drink of water and a bite of field ration, and not think about Elfavy. But it could be done, since it must.

The moon rose over Mount Granis. Passing an open patch of ground and looking downward, Raven saw the whole world turned to silver treetops. Then the forest gulped him again.

Some eight or nine hours after departure, Kors halted with an oath. His flashbeam picked out a thing that scuttled on spiderlike legs, a steel carapace and arms ending in sword blades.

"S guts!" Raven heard a gun clank from a holster. The thing met the light with impersonal lens eyes, then slipped into the brush.

"Guard robot," said Raven. "It won't attack humans. We're close now, so douse that flash and shut up."

He led the way, cat-cautious in darkness, thinking that Tolteca must indeed have beaten him here. Though probably not by very long. Maybe the situation could still be rescued. He topped the final steep climb and poised on the upper edge of the great amphitheater.

For a moment the moonlight blinded him. She hung gibbous over the Steps, turning them bone color and drowning stars. Then piece by piece Raven made out detail: mossy tiers curving downward to the valley floor, the ring of towers enclosing the ring-

shaped labyrinth, even the central fountain and its thin mercury-like jet. Even the gardens full of baleflower, though they looked black against all that slender white. He heard a mumbling down in the forum, but couldn't see what went on. With great care he padded forward into the open.

"Hee-ee," said a man who sat on an upper terrace. "That's hollow, Bale-friend."

Raven stopped dead. Kors said something raw at his back. Slowly, Raven turned to face the man. He had seen him before, in Instar. Now he sat hugging his knees and grinning. There was blood on his mouth.

"It is, you know," he said. "Hollow. Hollow is God. I hail hollow, hollow hallow hullo."

Raven looked into the man's eyes, but the moonlight was so reflected from them that they stared blank. "Where did the blood come from?" he asked most quietly.

"She was empty," said the man. "Empty and so small. It wasn't good for her to grow up and be hollow. Was it? That much more nothing?" He rubbed his chin, regarded the wet fingers, licked them and said plaintively: "The machines took her away. That wasn't fair. She was only a year and a half hollow."

Raven started down into the chalice.

"She came up about to my waist," said the voice behind him. "I think once, very long ago, before the hollow, I taught her to laugh. I even gave her a name once, and the name was Wormwood." Raven heard him begin to weep.

Kors took out his machine pistol, unclipped the holster and clamped it on as a rifle stock. "Easy there," said Raven, not looking back but recognizing the noise. "You won't need that."

"The muck I won't," said Kors.

"We aren't going to fire on any Gwydiona. And I doubt if Tolteca will give trouble."

They reached level sward and passed under a tower. Raven remembered it was the one he had climbed before. A child stood in the uppermost window, battering herself against the grille and uttering no sound.

Raven went through a colonnade. Just beyond, at the edge of the forum, some fifty Instar people were gathered, mostly men. Their clothes were torn, and even in the moonlight, across meters of distance, Raven could see unshaven chins.

Miguel Tolteca confronted them. "But he killed that little girl!" Tolteca shouted. "He killed her with his bare hands and ran away wiping his mouth. And the robots took the body away. And all you do is stare!"

A man trod forth. Awe blazed on his face. "Under She," he called, his voice rising and falling, with something of the remote quality of a voice heard through fever. "And She is the cold reflector of Ynis, and Ynis Burning Bush, though we taste the river. If the river gives light, O look how my shadow dances!"

"As Gonril danced for his mother," said the one next to him. "Which is joy, since man comes from darkness when he is born."

"Night are Day Faces are God!"

"Dance, God!"

"Howl for God, Vwi burns!"

An old man turned to a young girl, knelt before her and said, "Give me your blessing, Mother." She touched his head with an infinite tenderness.

"But are you all crazy?" wailed Tolteca.

It snarled in the crowd of them. Those who had begun to dance stopped. A man with tangled gray hair advanced on Tolteca, who made a whimpering noise and retreated. Raven recognized Dawyd.

"What do you mean?" asked Dawyd. His tone was metal.

"I mean... I want to say... I don't understand—"

"No," said Dawyd. "What do you mean? What is your significance? Why are you here?"

"T-t-to help—"

They began circling about, closing off Tolteca's retreat. He fumbled after his sidearm, but blindly, as if knowing how few he could shoot before they dragged him down.

"You wear the worst of the Night Faces," groaned Dawyd. "For it is no face at all. It is Chaos. Emptiness. Meaninglessness."

"Hollow," whispered the crowd. "Hollow, hollow, hollow."

Raven squared his shoulders. "Stick close and keep your mouth shut," he ordered Kors. He stepped from the colonnade shadows, into open moonlight, and approached the mob.

Someone on its fringe was first to see him: a big young man, who turned with a bear's growl and shambled to meet the newcomers. Raven halted and let the Gwydiona walk into him. A crook-fingered hand swiped at his eyes. He evaded it, gave a judo twist, and sent the man spinning across the forum.

"He dances!" cried Raven from full lungs. "Dance with him!" He snatched a woman and whirled her away. "Dance on the bridge from Yin to Yang!"

They didn't—quite. They stood quieter than it seemed possible men could stand. Tolteca's mouth fell open. His face was a moonlit lake of sweat. "Raven," he choked, "oa, ylem, Raven—"

"Shut up," muttered the Lochlanna. He edged next to the Namerican. "Stick by me. No sudden movements, and not a word."

Dawyd cringed. "I know you," he said. "You are my soul. And eaten with forever darkness and ever and no, no, no."

Raven raked his memory. He had heard so many myths, there must be one he could use...yes, maybe... His tones rolled out to fill the space

within the labyrinth:

"There was a time when the Sunsmith ran in the shape of a harbuck with silver horns. A hunter saw him and pursued him. They fled up a mountainside which was all grown over with crisflower, and wherever the harbuck's hoofs touched earth the crisflower bloomed, but wherever the hunter ran it withered. And at last they came to the top of the mountain, whence a river of fire flowed down a sheer cliff. The chasm beyond was cold, and so misty that the hunter could not even see if it had another side. But the harbuck sprang out over the abyss, and sparks showered where his hoofs struck—"

He held himself as still as they, but his eyes flickered back and forth, and he saw in the moonlight how they began to ease. The tiniest thawing stirred within him. He had not been sure he had grasped the complex symbolism of the myth he retold. Certainly he understood its meaning only in a vague way. But it was the right story. It could be interpreted to fit this situation, and thus turn his escape into a dance, which would lead men back into those rites that had evolved out of uncounted manslayings.

Still talking, he backed off, step by infinitesimal step, as if survival possessed its own calculus. Kors drifted beside him, screening Tolteca's shivers from their eyes.

But they followed. And others began to come from the buildings—from the towers, when they had passed through the colonnade again. When Raven put his feet on the first upward tier, a thousand faces must have been turned to him. None said a word, but he could hear them breathing, a sound like the sea beyond Instar's dike.

But now the myth was ended. He climbed another step, and another, always facing back to their upturned eyes. It seemed to him that She had

grown more full since he descended into this valley. But it couldn't have taken that long. Could it?

Tolteca grasped his hand. The Namerican's fingers were ice. Kors' voice would have been inaudible a meter away: "Can we keep on retreating, sir, or d' you think those gooks will rush us?"

"I wish I knew," Raven answered. Even then, he was angered at the word Kors used.

Dawyd spread his arms. "Dance the Sunsmith home!" he shouted.

The knowledge of victory went through Raven like a knife. Nothing but discipline kept him erect. He saw the crowd swirl outward, forming a series of interlocked rings, and hissed to Kors: "We've made it, if we're careful. We have to continue backing up, slowly, waiting between every step, while they dance. If we disappear into the woods at the very end, I think they'll be satisfied."

"What's happening?" The words grated in Tolteca's throat.

"Quiet, I told you!" Raven felt the man stagger against him. Well, he thought, it had been a vicious shock, especially for someone with no real training in death. Talk might keep Tolteca from collapse, and the dancers below—now starting to tread a stately measure, absorbed in it as children—wouldn't be aware that the symbols above them whispered together.

"All right." Raven felt the rhythm of the dance indicate a backward step for him. He guided Tolteca with a hand to the elbow "You came here with some idiotic notion of protecting Elfay. What then?"

"I, I, I went down...to the plaza... They were—all mumbling—it didn't make sense, it was ghastly—"

"Not so loud!"

"I saw Dawyd. Tried to talk to him. They all, all got more and more excited. A little girl yelled and ran from me. That man, her father, I swear he

was her father, killed her. The cleaning robots s-s-simply carried off the body. They began...closing in on me—"

"Enough. Now, steady. Another backward step. Halt." Raven stood as if cast in metal, for many heads turned his way. At this distance under the moon, they lacked faces. When their attention had drifted back to the dance, Raven breathed:

"It must be a mutation. Mutation and genetic drift, acting on a small initial population. Maybe that story of theirs is true, they're all descended from one man and two women—though it sounds like a myth— Their metabolism changed. They're all violently allergic to tobacco, for instance. Not that the change was great, in glandular terms. They may well be interfertile with us, biologically speaking. Though culturally, no, I don't believe they are the same species. Not any more."

"Baleflower?" asked Tolteca. His tone was thin and shaky, like a hurt child's.

"Yes. You told me it emits an indole when it blooms. Not one that affects the normal human biochemistry; but still, chemically related to the substances associated with schizophrenia. *They* are susceptible. Every Gwydiona springtime, they go insane."

The soundless dance below jarred into a quicker, staccato beat. Raven used the chance to climb several tiers in a hurry.

"It's a wonder they survived the first few generations," he said when he must stop again. "Somehow, they did, and began the slow painful adaptation. Naturally, they don't remember the insane episodes. They don't dare. That's the underlying reason why they've never made a scientific investigation of Bale, or taken the preventive measures that look so obvious to us. Instead, they built a religion and a way of life around it. But



only in the first exuberant flush of the season are they even able to admit to themselves that they don't consciously know what happens. They worked out their culture, trial and error, through centuries, until they reached a point where little damage is done in their madness.

"Remember, their psychology isn't truly human. You and I are mixtures, good, bad, indifferent; our conflicts have we always with us. The Gwydiona seem to concentrate all their troubles into these few days. That's why there used to be so much destruction, till they stumbled into ways to cope with it. That's why they are so sane most of the year. In fact, they are so well adapted now that they don't, they can't colonize the rest of the planet. They don't know why, but I do: no baleflower. I wonder what would happen to a Gwydiona taken away from his periodic dementia. I suspect it would be rather horrible.

"Their material organization protects them: strong buildings, no isolated homes, no firearms, no atomic energy, everything that might be harmful or harmed locked away for the duration of hell. The Holy City there, every such spot on the planet, I suppose, is built like a warren, full of places to run and dodge and hide and lock yourself away when homicidal fury breaks loose. The walls are padded, the ground is soft. But of course, the main bulwark is psychological. Myths, symbols, rites, so much a part of their lives that even in their lunacy they remember. Probably more than in their sanity: things they dare not recall when conscious, the wild and tragic symbols, the Night Faces that aren't talked about. Slowly, over the generations, they've groped their way to a system which keeps their world somewhat meaningful, somewhat orderly, while the baleflower blooms. Which actually channels the mania, so that very few people get hurt any more; so they act out their

hates and fear, dance them out, believing their myths are true... instead of clawing each other in the physical eyes."

The dance was losing pattern. It wouldn't end after all, Raven thought, but merely dissolve into aimlessness. Well, that would serve, if he could disappear and be forgotten.

He said to Tolteca, "You had to come bursting into their dream universe and unbalance it. You killed that little girl."

"Oa, name of mercy." The engineer covered his face.

Raven sighed. "Forget it. Partly my fault. I should have told you at once what I surmised."

They were halfway up the terraces when someone broke through the dancers and came bounding toward them. Two, Raven saw, his heart gone hollow. The moonlight cascaded over their blond hair, turning it to frost.

"Stop," called Elfavy, low and with laughter. "Stop, Regan."

He wondered what sort of destiny the accidental likeness of his name to that of a myth would prove to be.

She paused a few steps below him. Byord clutched her hand, looking about from bright soulless eyes. Elfavy brushed a lock off her forehead, a gesture he remembered. "Here is the River Child, Regan," she called. "And you are the rain. And I am the Mother, and darkness in me."

Beyond her shoulder, he saw that others had heard. They were halting in the dance, one by one, and staring up.

"Welcome, then," said Raven. "Go back to your home in the meadows, River Child. Take him home, Bird Maiden."

Byord's small face opened. He screamed.

*"Don't eat me, mother!"*

Elfavy bent down and embraced him. "No," she crooned, "oh, no, no, no. You shall come to me. Don't you recall it? I was in the ground, and

rain fell on me, and it was dark where I was. Come with me, River Child."

Byord shrieked and tried to break free. She dragged him up toward Raven. From the crowd below, a deep voice lifted: "And the earth drank the rain, and the rain was the earth, and the Mother was the Child and carried Ynis in her arms."

"Jingleballs!" muttered Kors. His scarecrow form slouched forward, to stand between the Commandant and those below. "That tears it."

"I'm afraid so," said Raven.

Dawyd sprang onto the lowest tier. His tone rang like a trumpet: "They came from the sky and violated the Mother! Can you hear the leaves weep?"

"Now what?" Tolteca glared at them, where they surged and shouted. "What do they mean? It's a nightmare, it doesn't make sense!"

"All nightmares make sense," Raven answered. The homicidal urge is awake and looking for something to destroy. And it has just figured out what, too."

"The ship, huh?" Kors hefted his gun.

"Yes," said Raven. "Rainfall is a fertility symbol. So what kind of symbol do you think a spaceship landing on your home soil and discharging its crew is? What would you do to a man who attacked your mother?"

"I hate to shoot those unarmed bastards," said Kors, "but—"

Raven snarled like an animal: "If you do, I'll kill you myself!"

He regained control and drew out his miniradio. "I'll warn Utiel. There mustn't be any spaceship for them to attack when they get there. Then we'll see if we can save our own hides."

Elfavy reached him. She flung Byord at his feet, where the boy sobbed in his terror, having insufficient mythic training to give pattern to that which stirred within him. Elfavy fixed her gaze wide upon Raven. "I

know you," she panted. "You sat on my grave once, and I couldn't sleep."

He thumbed the minirad switch and put the little box to his lips. Her fingernails gashed his hand, which opened in sheer reflex. She snatched the box and flung it from her, further than he would have believed a woman could throw. "No!" she cried. "Don't leave the darkness in me, Regan! You woke me up once!"

Kors started forward. "I'll get it," he snapped. Elfavy pulled his knife from its sheath as he passed and thrust it between his ribs. He sank on all fours, astonished in the moonlight.

Down below, the howl of amok broke loose as they saw. Dawyd shuffled to the minirad box, picked it up, gaped at it, tossed it back into the mob. They halted a moment, a mill-race.

Raven stooped over Kors. The soldier bubbled blood: "Get started, Commandant. I'll hold 'em." He picked up his gun and took an unsteady aim.

"No." Raven snatched it from him. "It's us who came to them."

"Horse apples," said Kors, and died.

Raven straightened. He handed Tolteca the gun and the withdrawn dagger, and added his own weapons. "On your way," he said. "You have to reach the ship before they do."

"You go!" Tolteca screamed.

"I'm trained in unarmed combat," said Raven. "I can hold them a good deal longer than you, clerk."

He stood thinking. Elfavy knelt beside him. She clasped his hand. Byord trembled at his feet.

"You might bear in mind next time," said Raven, "that a Lochlanna has obligations."

He gave Tolteca a shove. The Namerican drew a deep breath and ran.

"O the harbuck at the cliff's edge!" called Dawyd joyously. "The arrows of the sun are in him!" He went after Tolteca like a streak. Raven pulled loose from Elfavy, intercepted the

older man, and stiff-armed him. Dawyd rolled down the green steps, into the band of men that yelped, and there they tore him apart.

Raven went back to Elfavy. She still knelt, holding her son, and he had never seen anything so gentle as her smile. "We're next," he said. "But you've time to get away. Run. Lock yourself in a tower room."

Her hair swirled about her shoulders with the gesture of negation. "Sing me the rest."

"You can save Byord too," he begged.

"It's such a beautiful song," said Elfavy.

Raven watched the men of Instar feasting. He hadn't much voice left, but he did his lame best.

*"—'Tis down in yonder garden  
green,  
Love, where we used to walk,*

*The finest flower that e'er was  
seen  
Is withered to a stalk.*

*'The stalk is withered dry, my  
love,  
So will our hearts decay;  
So make yourself content, my  
love,  
Till God calls you away.'*

"Thank you, Regan," said Elfavy.

"Will you go now?" he asked.

"I," she said. "How could I? We are the Three."

He sat down beside her, and she leaned against him. His free hand stroked the boy's damp hair.

Presently the crowd uncoiled itself and lumbered up the steps. Raven arose. He moved away from Elfavy, who remained where she was. If he could hold all their attention, she might survive the night.

And not remember.

# Among Our Contributors

## **FORREST J. ACKERMAN —**

should need no introduction to anyone interested in Science Fiction, identified with the field, as he has been, for so many years.

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guest of honor at the recent Detroit World Science Fiction Convention and author of several SF novels, has been making an enviable name for himself, in recent years, in both this and the Mystery field. His *PERISH BY THE SWORD*, winner of Macmillan's "Cock Robin" Award, has been widely praised.

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active in New York fandom, one of the founders of the Lunarians, is President of the Eastern Science Fiction Association.

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active in the field, professionally, for the past twenty years, is the author of *ROCKETS THROUGH SPACE*, *ROBOTS AND CHANGELINGS*, *NERVES*, etc. etc.

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prominent military analyst and historian, makes his first appearance (we believe) in this field with the present story.

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## **KIT REED —**

New Haven newspaper woman, in her mid twenties, who has just become a mother, has attracted wide attention in the field for the sensitivity of her stories.

## **HANS STEFAN SANTESSON —**

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