

PLANET stories

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BLACK PRIESTESS OF VARDA

OUTLAWED, SENTENCED TO THE
VAT, A FEW FORESTERS STILL
DEFIED FOUL SASSO'S
LOVELIEST WITCH!

An Exciting Novel
by **ERIK FENNEL**



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PLANET STORIES



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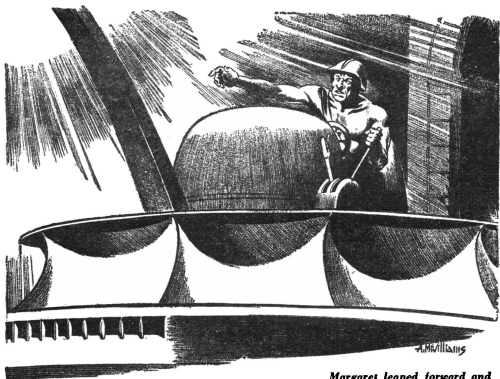
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*Margaret leaped forward and
slashed at Eldon's fingers.*

BLACK PRIESTESS OF VARDA

By **ERIK FENNEL**

She was well-named—Sin, foul witch and raving beauty, Beloved of Sasso, the Dark Power striving to capture, with her help, a lovely little world. Their only fear was a whispered legend—Elvedon, the Savior . . . But this crippled idiot blundering through a shower of sparks into their time and space—he could not be Elvedon!

THE PEN MOVED CLUMSILY in Eldon Carmichael's right hand. He had been left-handed, and the note itself was not easy to write.

Dear Margaret, he scratched. I understand . . .

When after a while the proper words still would not come he crossed the shadowed laboratory and took another long swig from the flat bottle in his topcoat pocket. He understood—he remembered his first one-eyed look in a mirror after the bandages were removed—but still he felt resentful and deeply sorry for himself.

He went back and tried to continue the letter but his thoughts veered erratically. The injury had been psychological as well as physical, involving loss of ability to face up to unpleasant facts, but still he could not force aside those memories.

There had been only a glimpse as the wrench slipped from Victor Schenley's hand and fell between the sprocket and drive chain of the big new compressor in the Institute's basement. He wondered. That look on Schenley's darkly saturnine face could have been merely imagination. Or horror. But there was something about the man . . . Still Eldon discounted his sus-

pictions as the unworthy inventions of a disturbed mind.

Only the quick reflexes that had once made him a better than average halfback had saved him from instant death as the jagged end of the heavy sprocket chain lashed out with the speed of an enraged cobra. And often during the pain-wracked weeks that followed he had almost wished he had been a little slower.

The ring sparkled tauntingly under his desk lamp. Margaret had returned it by mail, and though the wording of her note had been restrained its tone had been final.

He picked up the pen again and moved the stub of his left arm, amputated just above the elbow, to hold the paper in place. But he had forgotten again how *light* and unmanageable the stump was. The paper skidded and the pen left a long black streak and a blot.

Eldon made a choked sound that was partly a shout of anger and partly a whimper of frustration. He crumpled the note, hurled the pen clumsily toward the far wall, and buried his disfigured face in the curve of his single arm. His body shook with sobs of self-pity.

There was only an inch or so left in the bottle. He finished it in a single gulp and for a moment stood hesitantly. Then he switched on the brilliant overhead lights. Liquor could not banish his tormenting thoughts, but perhaps work might. His letter to Margaret would have to wait.

His equipment was just as he had left it that night so many months ago when Victor Schenley had called him to see the new compressor. The setup was almost complete for another experiment with the resonance of bound charges. Bound charges were queer things, he reflected, a neglected field of investigation. They were classed as electrical phenomena more for convenience than accuracy. Eldon's completed experiments indicated they might be—something else. They disobeyed too many of the generally accepted electrical and physical laws. Occasionally individual charges behaved as though they were actually alive and responding to external stimuli, but the stimuli were nonexistent or at least undetectable. And two or more bound charges placed in even imperfect resonance produced strange and inexplicable effects.

Working clumsily, he made the few remaining connections and set the special charge concentrators whining. The vacuum pumps clucked. A *strain* developed in the space around which the triplet charges were forming, something he could sense without seeing or hearing it. Now if only he could match the three charges for perfect resonance...

THE lacquer on Margaret Mason's fingernails was finally dry. She slipped out of her robe and, without disturbing her carefully arranged pale gold hair, dropped the white evening gown over her shoulders and gently tugged it into place around slender hips. This should be the evening when Victor stopped his sly suggestions and made an outright proposal of marriage. Mrs. Victor Schenley, Margaret savored the name. She knew what she wanted.

Eldon had seemed a good idea at the time, the best she could do. Despite his youth he was already Associate Director of the Institute, seemed headed for bigger things, and a couple of patents brought him modest but steady royalties. And, best of all, his ridiculously straightforward mind made him easy to handle.

It had seemed a good idea until the afternoon Victor Schenley had sauntered into her office in the administrative wing of the Institute and she had seen that look come into his eyes. She had recognized him instantly from the pictures the newspapers had carried when he inherited the great Schenley fortune, and had handled that first meeting with subtle care.

After that he had begun to come around more and more frequently, sitting on her desk and talking, turning on his charm. She had soon seen where his questions about the Institute's affairs were leading. He was determined to recover several million dollars which the elder Schenley had intended for the research organization he had founded and endowed, the Institute of which Victor had inherited titular leadership. Victor did not need the money. He just could not bear to see it escape his direct control. He still did not suspect how much Margaret had guessed of his plans—she knew when to hide her financial acumen behind her beauty—and she was holding that information in reserve.

He had begun to take her out, at first only on the evenings Eldon was busy, but then growing steadily bolder and more insistent. She had been deliberately provocative and yet aloof, rejecting his repeated propositions. She was playing for bigger stakes, the Schenley fortune itself. But she had remained engaged to Eldon. She disliked burning bridges behind herself unless absolutely necessary and Eldon was still a sure thing.

Then one day had come Eldon's casual remark that as Associate Director he was considering calling in the auditors for a routine check of the books. That had started everything. Victor had appeared startled, just as she expected, when she repeated Eldon's statement, and the very next night Eldon had met with his disfiguring "accident."

VICTOR parked his sleekly expensive car in front of the Institute's main building. "You wait here, dearest," he said. "I'll only be a few minutes."

He kissed her, but seemed preoccupied. She watched him, slender and natively dressed, as he crossed the empty lobby and pressed the button for the automatic elevator. The cage came down, he closed the door behind himself, and then Margaret was out of the car and hurrying up the walk. It was the intelligent thing to know as much as possible about Victor's movements.

The indicator stopped at three. Margaret lifted her evening gown above her knees and took the stairway at a run.

From Eldon's laboratory, the only room on the floor to show a light, she could hear voices.

"I don't like leaving loose ends, Carmichael. And it's your own gun."

"So it was deliberate. But why?" Eldon sounded incredulous.

Victor spoke again, his words indistinguishable but his tone assured and boastful.

There was a muffled splatting sound, a grunt of pain.

"Why, damn your soul!" Victor's voice again, raised in angry surprise. But no pistol shot.

Margaret peered around the door. Victor held the pistol, but Eldon had his wrist in a firm grasp and was twisting.

Victor's nose was bleeding copiously and, although his free hand clawed at Eldon's one good eye, the physicist was forcing him back. Margaret felt a stab of fear. If anything happened to Victor it would cost her—millions.

She paused only to snatch up a heavy, foot-long bar of copper alloy as she crossed the room. She raised it and crashed it against the side of Eldon's skull. Sheer tenacity of purpose maintained his hold on Victor's gun hand as he staggered back, dazed, and Margaret could not step aside in time. The edge of an equipment-laden table bit into her spine as Eldon's body collided with hers, and the bar was knocked from her hand.

Eldon got one sidelong glimpse of the girl and felt a sudden thrill that she had come to help him. He did not see what she had done.

And then hell broke loose. Leaping flames in his body. The unmistakable spitting crackle of bound charges breaking loose. The sensation of hurtling immeasurable distances through alternate layers of darkness and blinding light. Grey cotton wool filling his nose and mouth and ears. Blackness.

II

A SHRIVELED BLOOD-RED moon cast slanting beams through gigantic, weirdly distorted trees. The air was dead still where he lay, but overhead a howling wind tossed the top branches into eerie life. He was lying on moss. Moss that *writhed* resentfully under his weight. His stomach was heaving queasily and his head was one throbbing ache. His right leg refused to move. It seemed to be stuck in something.

He was not alone. Something was prowling nearby among the unbelievably tall trees. He sat up weakly, automatically, but somehow he did not care very deeply what happened to him. Not at first.

The prowling creature circled, trying to outline him against the slanting shafts of crimson moonlight. He heard it move, then saw its eyes blue-green and luminous in the shadows, only a foot or two from the ground.

Then his scalp gave a sudden tingle, for the eyes *rose upward*. Abruptly they were

five feet above ground level. He held his breath, but still more wondering than afraid. A vagrant gust brought a spicy odor to his nostrils, something strongly reminiscent of sandalwood. Not an animal smell.

He moved slightly. The moss beneath him *squeaked* a protest and writhed unpleasantly.

The thing with the glowing eyes moved closer. *Squeak-squeak, squeak-squeak*, the strange moss complained. And then a human figure appeared momentarily in a slender shaft of red light.

Margaret! But even as it vanished again in the shadows he knew it wasn't. A woman, yes, but not Margaret. Too short. Too fully curved for Margaret's graceful slenderness. And the hair had glinted darkly under the crimson moon while Margaret's was pale and golden. He wanted to call out, but a sense of lurking danger restrained him.

Suddenly the stranger was at his side.

"*Lackt*," she whispered.

The palms of her hands glowed suddenly with a cold white fire as she cupped them together to form a reflector. She bent over, leaving herself in darkness and directing the light upon Eldon as he sat in amazed disbelief.

Although the light from her hands dazzled his single eye he caught an impression of youth, of well-tanned skin glittering with an oily lotion that smelled of sandalwood, of scanty clothing—the night was stiflingly hot—and of hair the same color as the unnatural moonlight, clinging in ringlets around a piquant but troubled face.

"*El-ve-don?*" she asked softly. Her throaty voice betrayed passionate excitement.

He wet his dry lips.

"Eldon," he said hoarsely, wondering how she knew his name and why she had mispronounced it by inserting an extra syllable. "Eldon Carmichael."

His answer seemed to puzzle her. Her strange eyes gleamed more brightly.

"Who are you? And how in the name of sin do you do that trick with your hands?" It was the first question to enter his confused mind.

"Sin?" She repeated the one word and drew back with a suddenly hostile air.

For a moment she seemed about to turn and run. But then she looked once more at his mangled, disfigured face and gave a soft exclamation of disappointment and pity.

Eldon became irrationally furious and reached his single arm to grab her. She eluded him with a startled yet gracefully fluid motion and spat some unintelligible words that were obviously heartfelt curses. Her hand moved ominously to a pocket in her wide belt.

Then all at once she crouched again, moving her head from side to side. He opened his mouth, but she clamped one glowing hand over it while the other went up in a gesture commanding silence. Her hand was soft and cool despite its glow.

For a full minute she listened, hearing something Eldon could not. Then she placed her lips close to his ear and whispered. Her words were utterly unintelligible but her urgency communicated itself to him.

He tried to rise and discovered that his leg was deeply embedded in the dirt and moss. He wondered how it had gotten that way. The girl grasped his knee and pulled, and as soon as he saw what she wanted he put his muscles to work too. With an agonized shriek from the strange moss his leg came free and he tried to rise. The sudden movement made him dizzy.

Unhesitatingly the girl threw herself upon him, bearing him down while all the while she whispered admonitions he could not understand. She was strong in a lithe, whipcord way, and neither mentally nor physically was he in condition to resist. He allowed himself to be pushed to a reclining position.

The light from her hands went out abruptly, leaving the forest floor darker than ever. She reached into her belt, extracted a small object he could not see, touched it to his head. Eldon went rigid.

ONE of her hands grasped his belt. She gave a slight tug. His body rose easily into the air as though completely weightless, and when she released him he floated.

Her fingers found a firm hold on his collar. She moved, broke into a steady run, and his body, floating effortlessly at the height of her waist, followed. She ran

quietly, sure-footed in the darkness, with only the sound of her breathing and the thin protests of the moss under her feet. Sometimes his collar jerked as she changed course to avoid some obstacle.

"I have no weight, but I still have mass and therefore inertia," he found himself thinking, and knew he should be afraid instead of indulging in such random observations.

He discovered he could turn his head, although the rest of his body remained locked in weightless rigidity, and gradually he became aware of something following them. From the glimpses he caught in the slanting red moonbeams it resembled a lemur. He watched it glide from tree to tree like a flying squirrel, catch the rough bark and scramble upward, glide again.

A whistle, overhead, a sound entirely distinct from that of the wind-whipped branches, brought the girl to a sudden stop. She jerked Eldon to a halt in mid-air beside her and pulled him into the deeper shadow beneath a gnarled tree just as a great torpedo-shaped thing passed above the treetops, glistening like freshly spilled blood in the moonlight. Some sort of wingless aircraft.

They waited, the girl fearful and alert. The red moon dropped below the horizon and a few stars—they were of a normal color—did little to relieve the blackness. The flying craft returned, invisible this time but still making a devilish whistle that grated on Eldon's nerves like fingernails scraped down a blackboard as it zigzagged slowly back and forth. Then gradually the noise died away in the distance.

The girl sighed with relief, made a chirruping sound, and the lemur-thing came skittering down the tree beneath which they were hiding. She spoke to it, and it gave a sailing leap that ended on Eldon's chest. Its handlike paws grasped the fabric of his shirt. He sank a few inches toward the ground, but immediately floated upward again with nightmarish buoyancy.

The girl reached to her belt again, and then she was floating in the air beside him. She grasped his collar and they were slanting upward among the branches. The lemur-thing rose confidently, perched on his chest. They moved slowly up to treetop

level, where the girl paused for a searching look around. Then she rose above the trees, put on speed, and the hot wind whistled around Eldon's face as she towed him along.

It was a dream-scene where time had no meaning. It might have been minutes or hours. The throbbing of his headache diminished, leaving him drowsy.

The lemur-thing broke the spell by chattering excitedly. In the very dim starlight he could just discern that it was pointing upward with one paw, an uncannily human gesture.

The girl uttered a sharp word and dove toward the treetops, and Eldon looked up in time to see a huge leathery-winged shape swooping silently upon them. He felt the foetid breath and glimpsed hooked talons and a beak armed with incurving teeth as the thing swept by and flapped heavily upward again.

THE girl released him abruptly, leaving his heart pounding in sudden terrible awareness of his utter helplessness. He felt himself brush against a branch that stood out above the others and start to drift away. But the lemur hooked its hind claws into his shirt and grasped the branch with its forepaws, anchoring him against the wind.

A long knife flashed in the girl's hand and she was shooting upward to meet the monster. She had not deserted him after all. She closed in, tiny beside the huge shape, as the monster beat its batlike wings in a furious attempt to turn and rend her. There was a brief flurry, a high-pitched cry of agony, and the ungainly body crashed downward through a nearby treetop, thrashing in its death agonies.

Eldon felt the trembling reaction of relief as the girl glided downward, still breathing hard from her exertion, and it left him feeling even more helpless and useless than ever. Once more she took him in tow and the nightmare flight continued.

Over one area a ring of faintly luminous fog was rolling, spreading among the trees, contracting like a gascous noose.

"*Kauwa ne Sin,*" the girl spat, bitter anger in her voice, and fear and unhappiness too. She made a long high detour around the fog ring and looked back uncasily even after they were past.

ALL at once they were diving again, down below the treetops that to Eldon looked no different from any of the others. But to the girl it was journey's end. She twisted upright and her feet touched gently as she reached to her belt and regained normal weight. Eldon still floated.

The girl pushed him through the air and into a black hole between the spreading roots of a huge tree. The hole slanted downward, twisting and turning, and became a tunnel. The lemur-thing jumped down and scampered ahead.

It was utterly dark until she made her hands glow again, after they had passed a bend. Finally the tunnel widened into a room.

She left him floating, touched one wall, and it glowed with a soft, silvery light that showed him he was in living quarters of some kind. The walls were transparent plastic, and through their glow he could see the dirt and stones and tangled tree roots behind them. Water trickled in through a hole in one wall, passed through an oval pool of brightly colored tiles recessed into the floor, and vanished through a channel in the opposite wall. There were furnishings of strange design, simple yet adequate, and archways that seemed to lead to other rooms.

The girl returned to him, pushed him over to a broad, low couch, shoving him downward. She touched him with an egg-shaped object from her belt and he sank into the soft cushions as abruptly his body went limp and recovered its normal heaviness. He stared up at her.

She was beautiful in a vital, *different* way. Natural and healthily normal looking, but with an indescribable trace of the exotic. Her hair, he saw—now that the light was no longer morbidly ruddy—was a lovely dark red with glints of fire. She was young and self-assured, yet oddly thoughtful, and there was about her an aura of vibrant attraction that seemed to call to all his forgotten dreams of loveliness. But Eldon Carmichael was very sick and very tired.

She looked at him speculatively, a troubled frown narrowing her strangely luminous grey-green eyes, and asked a question. He shook his head to show lack of understanding, wondering who she was and where he was.

She turned away, her shoulders sagging with disappointment. Then she noticed that she was smeared with a gooey reddish-black substance, evidently from the huge bat-thing she had fought and killed. She gave a shiver of truly feminine repugnance.

Quickly she discarded her close fitting jacket, brief skirt and the wide belt from which her sheathed dagger hung, displaying no trace of embarrassment at Eldon's presence even when she stood completely nude.

Her body was fully curved but smoothly muscular, an active body. It was a symphony of perfection—except that across the curve of one high, firm breast ran a narrow crescent-shaped scar, red as though from a wound not completely healed. Once she glanced down at it and her face took on a hunted, fearful look.

She tested the temperature of the pool with one outstretched bare toe and then plunged in, and as she bathed herself she hummed a strangely haunting tune that was full of minor harmonies and unfamiliar melodic progressions. Yet it was not entirely a sad tune, and she seemed to be enjoying her bath. Occasionally she glanced over at him, questioning and thoughtful.

Eldon tried to stay awake, but before she left the pool his one eye had closed.

PAIN in the stump of his arm brought a vague remembrance of having used it to strike at someone or something. For a while he lay half awake, trying to recall that dream about a girl flying with him through a forest that certainly existed nowhere on Earth. But the sound of trickling water kept intruding.

He opened his eye and came face to face with the lemur-thing from his nightmare. Its big round eyes assumed an astounded, quizzical expression as he blinked, and then it was gone. He heard it scuttling across the floor.

He sat up and made a quick survey of his surroundings. Then the girl of the—no, it hadn't been a dream—emerged from an archway with the lemur on her shoulder. It made him think of stories he had read about witches of unearthly beauty and the uncannily intelligent animals, familiars, that served them.

"Hey, where am I?" he demanded.

She said something in her unfamiliar language.

"Who are you?" he asked, this time with gestures.

She pointed to herself. "Krasna," she said.

He pointed to himself. "Eldon, Eldon Carmichael."

"El-ve-don?" she asked just as eagerly as when she had found him, half as though correcting him.

He shook his head. "Just Eldon." Her eyes clouded and she frowned.

After a moment she spoke again, and again he shook his head. "Sorry, no savvy," he declared.

She snapped her fingers as though remembering something and hurried from the room, returning with a small globe of cloudy crystal. She motioned him to lie back, and for a minute or two rubbed the ball vigorously against the soft, smooth skin of her forearm. Then she held it a few inches above his eye and gestured that he was to look at it.

The crystal glowed, but not homogeneously. Some parts became brighter than others, and of different colors. Patterns formed and changed, and watching them made him feel drawn out of himself, into the crystal.

The strange girl started talking—talking—talking in an unhurried monotone. Gradually scattered words began to form images in his mind. Pictures, some of them crystal clear but with their significance still obscure, others foggy and amorphous. There were people and—things—and something so completely and utterly vile that even the thought made his brain cells cringe in fear of uncleanable defilement.

It must have been hours she talked to him, for when he came out of the globe and back into himself her voice was tired and there were wrinkles of strain across her forehead. She was watching him intently and he suspected he had been subjected to some form of hypnosis.

"Where am I? How did I get here?" he asked, and realized only when the words were out that he was speaking something other than English.

Krasna did not answer at once. Instead a look of unutterable sadness stole over

her face. And then she was weeping bitterly and uncontrollably.

Eldon was startled and embarrassed, not understanding but wishing he could do something, anything, to help her. Crying females had always disturbed him, and she looked so completely sad and—defeated. The lemur-thing glowered at him resentfully.

"What is it?" he asked.

"You are not El-ve-don," she sobbed.

With his new command of her language, perhaps aided by some measure of telepathy, he received an impression of El-ve-don as a shining, unconquerable champion of unspecified powers, one who was fated to bring about the downfall of—of something obscenely evil and imminently threatening. He could not recall what it was, and Krasna's wracking sobs did not help him think clearly.

"Of course I'm not El-ve-don," he declared, and felt deeply sorry for himself that he was not. "I'm just plain Eldon Carmichael, and I am—or was—a biophysicist." Once, before Victor Schenley had tried to kill him, he *had* been a competent and reasonably happy biophysicist.

At last she wiped her eyes.

"Well, if you don't remember, you just don't, I guess," she sighed. "You are in the world of Varda. Somehow you must have formed a Gateway and *come through*. I found you just by chance and thought—hoped—that you were El-ve-don."

She went on with a long explanation, only parts of which Eldon understood.

HE WAS quite familiar with the theory of alternate worlds—his work with bound charges had given him an inkling of the actuality of other dimensions, and the fantastic idea that bound charges existed simultaneously in two or more "worlds" at once, carrying their characteristic reactions across a dimensional gap had occurred to him frequently as his experiments had progressed. He had even entertained the notion that bound charges were the basic secret of life itself—but the proof still seemed unbelievable. Varda was a world adjoining his own, separated from it by some vagary of space or time-spiral warping or some obscure phase of the Law of Alternate Probabilities. But here he was, in Varda.

He distinctly remembered hearing one of the resonant system components in his laboratory let go, not *flow* but *break*, and guessed that the sudden strain might have been sufficient to warp the very nature of matter in its vicinity.

"Your world is one of the Closed Worlds," Krasna explained. "Things from it do not *come through* easily. Unfortunately the one from which the Luvans came is open much of the time."

Eldon tried to think what a Luvan was, but recalled only a vaguely disquieting impression of something disgusting—and deadly.

"I hoped so much." Tears gathered in Krasna's strange eyes. "I thought perhaps when I found you that the old prophecy—the one to defeat Sasso—but perhaps I have been a fool to believe in the old prophecy at all. And Sasso—" Her expressive mouth contorted with loathing.

"How do I get back to my own world?" Eldon demanded.

Krasna stared at him until he began to fidget.

"There is but one Gateway in all Varda, the Gateway of Sasso," she declared in the tone of a person stating an obvious if unpleasant fact. "And only El-ve-don can defeat the Faith."

"Oh!" He laughed in mirthless near-hysteria at the thought of himself as the unconquerable El-ve-don. Her words left him bleakly despondent.

"What happened to the others who were near me when—this—happened?" he asked. "The man and the woman?"

Krasna straightened in surprise. "There were others? Oh! Perhaps one of them is El-ve-don!"

"I doubt it," Eldon said wryly.

BUT Krasna's excitement was not to be quelled. She spoke to the lemuring as if to another human, and the creature scuttled up the tunnel leading to the surface. Eldon thought once more of the witch-familiars of Earth legends. If he had *come through* to Varda, perhaps Vardans had visited Earth.

"We shall find out about them soon," she said.

"What happens to me?" Eldon wanted to know.

He had to repeat his question, for

Krasna had suddenly become deeply preoccupied. At last she looked at him. There was pity in her glance, not pity for his situation but pity for a disfigured, frightened and querulous cripple. She did not understand the overwhelming longing for Earth which was mounting within him every second. Her pity grated upon his nerves. He could pity himself all he chose—and he had reason enough—but he rejected the pity of others.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Oh, you can stay with me, I guess. That is, if you dare associate with me." There was bitterness in her voice.

None of it made sense. She had saved him from the forest, brought him to her home. Why should he be afraid to associate with her? But all he wanted was to find Margaret, if she were in this strange world, and escape back to Earth. There, though he was a cripple, he was not so abysmally ignorant. He knew he should feel grateful to this red-haired girl, but deep in his brain an irrational resentment gnawed. He tried to fight it down, knowing he had to learn much more about his new environment before he could survive alone. The last shreds of his crumbling self-confidence had been stripped away.

Suddenly he realized he was ravenously hungry.

"All right," the girl said. "We will eat now."

He stared at her in discomfiture. He had not mentioned food. She laughed.

"Really," she said, "you seem to know nothing about closing your mind."

Resentment flared higher. She was a telepath, and he was not proud of his thoughts.

The passageway into which he followed her was dark, but after a few steps her hands began to light the way as they had in the forest.

"How do you do it?" he asked. To him the production of cold light in living tissues was even more astounding than her control of gravity. That still seemed too much like a familiar dream he had had many times on Earth, and it probably had some mechanical basis.

She smiled at him as though at a curious child. "That is old knowledge in the Open Worlds. Your Closed Worlds must be very strange."

"But how do you control it?"

She shrugged her lovely shoulders. "You may be fit to learn—later." But she spoke doubtfully.

The food was unfamiliar but satisfying, warmed in a matter of seconds in an oven-like box to which he could see no power connections or controls. In reply to his questions she pointed to a hexagonal red crystal set in the back of the box and looked at him as though he should understand.

One of the foods was a sort of meat, and with only one arm Eldon found himself in difficulty. Krasna noticed, took his eating utensils and cut it into bite-sized bits. She said nothing, but he finished the meal in sullen silence, resentful that he needed a woman's help even to eat.

Afterwards Krasna buckled on her heavy belt with the dagger swinging at her hip.

"I must go out now," she said. "The not-quite-men of the Faith are prowling tonight, and Luvans are with them."

"But—?"

"You could not help."

The reminder of his uselessness rankled, but still he felt a pang at the thought of a girl like her going into danger.

"But you?" he asked.

"I can take care of myself. And if not, what matter? I am Krasna."

Once more she read his thoughts.

"No. Stay here." It was not a request but an order. "If you were to fall into the hands of—her—it would add to my troubles. And my own people would kill you on sight, because you have been with me."

III

AFTER SHE LEFT HE PROWLED restlessly around the underground rooms, looking, touching, exploring. He tried to find the controls for the illuminated walls, and there were none. Every square inch of the smooth plastic seemed exactly like every other. The other devices—even the uses of some he could not determine—were the same. There were no switches or other controls. It was all very puzzling.

He spent most of his time in the main room where Krasna had left the walls

lighted, for the unfamiliar darkness of the others gave him the eerie feeling that something was watching him from behind. Some of the fittings seemed unaccountably familiar, although operating on principles he was unable to understand. The sense of familiarity amid strangeness gave him a schizophrenic sensation, as though two personalities struggled for control, two personalities with different life-patterns and experiences. A most unsettling feeling.

He thought of Margaret, longingly, and then of Victor. His fist clenched and his lips tightened. If Schenley were still alive, some day there would be a reckoning. Schenley had been sure of himself and had boasted. And now, he was sure, Margaret knew just what sort of rat Victor really was.

His thoughts turned to his anomalous position with the red-haired girl, Krasna had brought him out of the perilous forest purely because she thought he was this wonderful El-ve-don. And now he was living in her home, entirely dependent upon her sense of pity. It was galling.

He found a large rack containing scrolls mounted on cleverly designed double rollers, and after the first few minutes of puzzling out the writing letter by letter he found himself reading with growing fluency. Part of the same hypnotic and telepathic process, he reflected, through which Krasna had taught him her spoken language. At first he read mainly to escape his own unpleasant thoughts and keep occupied, but then he grew interested. Brief, undetailed references began to make pictures—the Gateway—the Fortress of Sin—the Forest People, evidently the clan to which Krasna belonged—the Luvans—Sasso. His mind squirmed away from that last impression. Gradually the disconnected pictures began to form a sequence.

He was still reading hours later when Krasna emerged from the tunnel. She gave a little sigh of fatigue, dropped her heavy weapon belt, and started to undress. But the lemur-thing interrupted. It raced down the tunnel, a furry streak that chattered for attention.

"Later, Tikta," Krasna told it, continuing to disrobe. "I'm too tired to understand."

The sight of her loveliness as she stepped into the warm pool gave Eldon

no pleasure. If everything had been different . . . Instead it brought rankling resentment, of her, of his condition, of everything. She looked at him just as impersonally as she did at her lemur. It was evident she did not consider him a man, a person. He was just something she had picked up by mistake and was too kind-hearted to dispose of. Under the circumstances it would have been ridiculous for him to turn away.

"Now, Tikta," she said after her bath, sinking down on one of the couches.

The little creature ran to her, leaped to her shoulder and placed its tiny handlike front paws on opposite sides of her head. Krasna closed her eyes.

To Eldon, observing closely, it was like watching someone who was seeing an emotional movie. Hate, anger, hope, surprise, puzzlement, all followed each other across her mobile, expressive features, ending in disappointment and disgust. At last Tikta removed its paws and Krasna opened her eyes.

"Your—friends—" she hesitated over the word. "They are in Varda. Both."

"Is the girl all right? Where are they? How do you know? Did you see them?" The questions tumbled from Eldon's lips.

Krasna smiled faintly. "No, I have not seen them. But Tikta can catch the thoughts of all wild things that can not guard their minds, and tell me. The wild things saw your—friends." Again she hesitated, and this time made a grimace of angry distaste.

"Where is the girl? Can you take me to her?" he demanded excitedly.

"No. They are both beyond the Mountains that Move."

"So?"

"In the land of the Faith," she snapped.

"But couldn't you—?"

Pity was almost smothered in stern contempt as she looked at him. "We do not go among the Faith except for a purpose. And that purpose is not returning you to your—friends."

"But your people?"

"They would not help you if they could.

For I am Krasna."

He did not grasp the significance of her words but the firmness of her tone indicated there was no use arguing with this self-willed, red-haired person. Nevertheless

he resolved to try to find Margaret, and as soon as possible.

Krasna's eyes widened with apprehension at his thought.

"You are a fool. And if you must try you had better read all the scrolls first. Only El-ve-don could survive, and the death of the Faith is not easy."

Eldon cursed silently. This damnable girl, although beautiful in her own odd way, not only insulted him with her pity but invaded his mind.

"Well, shut your mind if you don't like it," she snapped angrily. "You're odd, too, and far from beautiful."

MMARGARET MATSON opened her eyes. A strange man stood over her, and what a man! He was huge and hard looking, with dark, wind-toughened skin. He was dressed in some sort of barbaric military uniform, colorful and heavily decorated. And he was playing with a needle pointed dagger.

Her mouth opened. "Victor!" she screamed.

Her voice reverberated hollowly from the curved walls and roof of a small metal room. The big man screwed up his face at the shrill noise.

"Victor! Help me!" she shouted again.

Victor failed to answer.

"Eldon!" she yelled.

The big warrior spun his dagger casually, the way a boy would play with a stick. His lips curled back in a wolfish grin, emphasizing two of his strong white teeth that projected beyond the others like fangs. His whole appearance was brutal.

"Where am I? What do you want with me?" she gasped. Then her glance followed the man's eyes. Her form-fitting evening gown was torn and disarrayed. She snatched it down with a show of indignant modesty, and the man grinned widely. One corner of his mouth twitched.

Margaret would have been even more frightened except that the big soldier's reaction struck a familiar note that lent her confidence. He spoke, but his words were gibberish.

Then from a wall locker he produced two helmet-like devices, metal frames with pieces of some translucent material set to touch the wearer's temples.

She started to draw away as he stooped

to push one over her hair, but submitted when he frowned and fingered the point of his knife. He donned the other helmet.

"My name is Wor, *merta* of the Forces and *torna* to Great Sasso Himself." She understood him now.

"You and I might be good friends—if Sin allows," he continued. "You bear a great resemblance to Highness Sin, even though your color is faded."

Despite her position Margaret bridled angrily. Wor laughed uproariously. "Your temper is like Highness Sin's too," he declared appreciatively.

"Who—who is this Sin?"

"You will find out," Wor replied evenly. Then his face sobered and softened. "If you want a chance to be with me, take my advice and be careful what you say and even what you think. Sin is all-powerful—and jealous. She *knew* when you appeared in our world."

"Where is Victor?" Margaret asked. "Is he—?"

"The one-armed one, or the other?"

Margaret's face showed scorn. "Would I be interested in cripples?"

"Oh, the slender one. He too will be taken before Highness Sin."

"And Eldon?"

Wor looked annoyed. "Gone. *Came through* on the seaward side of the Mountains."

"But why didn't you get him, too?"

Wor was distinctly irked. "We looked. Either he *came through* below ground level, in which case he is dead, or the Rebels found him, in which case he is dead, too. Write him off."

Margaret let a couple of tears roll down her cheeks, but not from grief over Eldon. She knew that in this strange situation into which she had been flung she would need a friend and protector.

"What is going to happen to poor helpless me? Oh, won't you help me?" she asked plaintively. Her eyes expressed open admiration for the corded muscles rippling beneath Wor's military tunic.

It was an ancient appeal and Margaret realized it had been most obviously applied. But it worked. Men were so easily handled, even this Wor. Carefully she hid her satisfaction as he sat down beside her.

She moved a little closer to him as he

talked, telling her about his land and what she could expect. After a while he sheathed his dagger.

Someone tapped on the bulkhead. Wor bellowed and the door opened. The man who entered raised his hand in a respectful salute, and Margaret would have given much to understand what he said. But Wor stretched out one enormous hand and snatched the helmet from her head. The words became meaningless but she could still see the deference with which Wor was treated.

After the man had gone and Wor had crammed the helmet back on her head she was careful by word and look to let him see she understood his importance. She could almost see his great chest swell. Men were so simple, when handled properly.

A whistle emitted a warning screech.

"We land in a few minutes," Wor told her. "Do nothing that might anger Highness Sin. Your life depends upon it."

He rose, snatched her to him in an embrace that was without tenderness and left her lips bruised. Before she could decide whether to resist or respond he was gone. A few minutes later the flying machine struck with a cushioned thump and the sibilant hiss of its engines died.

THE two soldiers who escorted her out looked suspiciously at the helmet Wor had allowed her to retain, but made no attempt to remove it. The ship had landed in the courtyard of a tremendous castle. Massive, weather-streaked grey walls soared upward to end high above in incongruously stream-lined turrets from which projected the ribbed and finned snouts of strange weapons. Windows were few and small, and the whole structure looked incredibly ancient.

The two guards hustled her through a circular doorway into a large hall that formed a startling contrast to the bleak exterior. It was richly appointed, and the walls were hung with heavy tapestries that glowed softly in patterns that changed and shifted even as she watched them.

There were many people in the room, soldiers and richly gowned women with olive skins and dark hair. But again there was contrast, for standing stiffly against one wall was a rank of perhaps thirty men and women, all stark naked and all staring

straight ahead with blank unseeing eyes. They did not move a muscle as Margaret was led in, though other heads turned and the low hum of conversation ceased abruptly.

Margaret's attention centered almost instantly on the woman occupying a dais at the far end of the hall, and after that she could not tear her eyes away. This was Highness Sin, of whom even Wor stood in awe. Margaret stared and Sin stared back. Except for the difference in coloring this woman could have been Margaret's twin. She was beautiful, the white skin of her face and shoulders setting off her revealingly cut jet gown and ebony hair, and her haughty face wore an expression of ruthless power. Margaret knew that under similar circumstances she would have worn the same expression.

The woman raised one exquisitely groomed hand and the guards pushed Margaret forward, her feet sinking deep into springy carpeting at each step. Every eye except those of the stiff, unseeing people against the wall turned to follow her, and Margaret was uncomfortably aware of her torn and soiled gown and her tangled, uncombed hair.

She looked up at Sin and had an uncomfortable feeling the ruler was looking into her mind, *understanding* her.

"So you are the woman who *came through*." Even her voice was remarkably like Margaret's.

Margaret said nothing.

"Why did you come to my world?" the ruler asked.

"It wasn't any of my doing," Margaret exploded petulantly. "I still don't know where I am, and I don't think I like it here, and I had nothing to do with coming. It was all on account of that Eldon's stupid experiments, and if he hadn't tried to kill Victor—"

"But you are here," Sin interrupted, tightening her sensuous full lips in a way Margaret recognized as one of her own mannerisms. "Perhaps I can find use for you."

"Can't you send me back—?"

"Why should I?"

There was no answer to that, and Margaret tried to hide her growing nervousness. Sin allowed herself a feline smile.

Wor came striding forward. "Highness

Sin," he boomed. "I desire to claim my right to this captive."

Sin's eyes narrowed suspiciously, and Margaret's intuition told her the similarity between them had something to do with her hesitation.

"No. She is not of the Rebels, and therefore you have no captor's rights. You recognized her as an Outworldling yourself when you gave her a thought helmet. Thus by custom she is subject to a hearing—if I so choose."

"Then grant me, Oh Sin—"

"Go pick yourself another plaything. There are several in the slave pits who still have their minds. I must find out more about this one."

"But—"

"I have spoken."

Wor turned away, disgruntled but not daring to try the dark ruler's patience further. Sin returned her attention to Margaret.

"Follow me," she ordered. "We will talk in private."

THE ROOMS outdid any Hollywood production for sheer sybaritic elegance. Sin chose a couch and sank down with a languidness that did not fool Margaret in the least.

"Don't you want to thank me for saving you from becoming Wor's plaything?" she asked slyly.

Margaret decided on boldness. There was too much similarity between them for any successful deception as to character.

"Wor might have made an interesting plaything himself," she retorted. "But he is yours?"

Sin put her head back against the cushions. Her high, brittle laughter contained a trace of malice.

"Oh, I must read his thoughts when I tell him that," she said. "Earth Woman, Wor likes to consider himself rough and masterful. He's a mutant savage, you know, and if it were not for the Luvans of Great Sasso he would be only—"

"But he's yours?" Margaret broke in.

Without rising Sin assumed a regal posture. "All who serve Great Sasso are mine."

Margaret raised her eyebrows but said nothing.

Sin changed the subject abruptly. "There

were three of you who *came through*. One my Forces could not find."

"You mean Eldon?" Margaret asked.

Sin sat up, tensely alert. "Did you say *El-ve-don*?" she demanded harshly.

"No. Eldon."

Sin relaxed slightly. "What is he like?"

Margaret allowed herself a superior smile. "Why do you ask?"

"What is he like?" Sin's voice crackled.

Margaret held out the little finger of one hand and made winding motions around it. Evidently Sin understood the reference, for she smiled and leaned back.

"Why are you interested in him?" Margaret insisted. "He's crippled and disfigured, ugly, an honest fool. And Wor said he's probably dead."

Sin frowned. "We — myself serving Great Sasso — have almost won Varda. But the resistance of the Rebels provides an annoying delay. And there is a certain prophecy among the Rebels, a stupid story about a creature called *El-ve-don*, and the name was sufficiently similar . . . We understand each other, Earth Woman?"

Margaret nodded emphatically.

"Just what were your relations with this — this Eldon?"

Margaret explained.

"Oh, you have a monogamous society there," Sin commented.

"Theoretically, yes."

"We did here too, in the dark ages before the Faith. Stupid, isn't it? So restricting."

Sin had regained the poise Eldon's name had disturbed, and Margaret decided to press her advantage while she was in this friendly mood.

"I'd like to see Victor now, Highness. Wor said—"

Sin's eyes hardened instantly. "Sometimes Wor talks too much. No. I must see the Earthman first."

"But—"

"Remember, my dear, I am Sin."

IV

THE GUARDS WHO CAME FOR Margaret looked startled at their orders.

"Not the slave pens, Highness?" one of them asked.

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"This woman will perhaps become Of the Faith," Sin snapped. "Treat her accordingly."

Margaret looked up, but Sin offered no explanation.

The suite of rooms to which she was taken were all she could have desired, but the windows looked out on a sheer drop and the guards bolted the door behind her. She had just time to glance around when the door opened again.

"Your first slave," a single guard announced. "A gift to you from Highness Sin."

The slave was a girl in her teens, scrawny and underfed and completely nude. Her face wore the same blank, uncomprehending look Margaret had noticed on the naked people in the audience chamber. Across her rigidly outstretched arms lay several rich dresses.

"One of the Rebels," the guard satisfied Margaret's curiosity. "They make good durable slaves when their brains have been treated and they have received the slave-mark of Sin, though of course you must think your orders in detail. Perhaps you had better speak your orders at first, until you grow used to giving thought-commands. In the Vat these Rebels are excellent. So vital.

"Highness Sin also sends you some of her own clothing." He withdrew, and this time did not lock the door.

"Put those dresses down," Margaret told her slave. The girl complied.

"Where is the bath?"

The slave girl pointed. She seemed to have no power of speech and her face was dull and emotionless.

"Get it ready for me."

At first Margaret felt faintly uncomfortable under the girl's mindless stare, but soon grew accustomed to it. The girl obeyed perfectly, like a machine. Sin's gowns clung as though made for Margaret alone, and there was a table loaded with cosmetics. When she was finished Margaret felt more herself. Fresh clothes did wonders for her morale.

Later the guard came again, bowed respectfully, and escorted her to the audience hall. He led her directly to Sin's throne.

"You will want a man, of course," Sin began abruptly. "Which shall it be, Wor

or your victor from Earth? Or does some other catch your fancy?"

Margaret noticed for the first time that Victor was in the room, well back from Sin's dais. He looked worried and a soldier stood just behind him. Perhaps a guard. On Earth he had been an excellent catch, but here he had nothing except a certain sly venomousness to recommend him. And already she had sensed complex undercurrents of intrigue and hinted mysteries within the fortress. She must pick the one who could best help her, no longer by Earth standards but by those of Varda.

"I choose Wor," she announced.

Victor's head jerked in an angry gesture. A gleam of anticipation entered Wor's eyes as he stepped forward.

Sin's smile was definitely feline. "So be it. I believe you are a suitable candidate for the Faith, and tonight Wor will initiate you into the service of Great Sasso. Your Earth mind, my dear, has a certain potential value."

A BLOODY MOON leered through her windows. Wor came. There was a trace of diffidence in his manner that had been lacking earlier, and she wondered what payment Sin expected for this favorable treatment. For there was no doubt payment would be demanded. She must be sure it was not overpayment.

Wor guided her to an air car on the flat roof of the fortress. It was not the huge craft in which she had been brought in, but so small they lay side by side. The control buttons looked ridiculously small under Wor's huge hands.

With a hiss they were in the air. She was very conscious of Wor beside her, of his tremendous strength and blatant maleness, and she turned to watch him as he increased their speed. He had wanted her—other men had wanted her before and she knew the signs—but now he ignored her. He was excited, but about something other than herself. She wondered, deeply annoyed, what outlandish sort of religion this Sasso-worship could be to so captivate him. She asked him, but he only grinned.

"There! Over there!" He pointed suddenly in joyful excitement. A great dead-black globe loomed ahead. The stunted foliage of the flat, sandy plain ceased

abruptly in a circle around it, as though afraid to approach. *Something*, some intangible feeling that radiated from the huge ball, made Margaret shiver with a strangely apprehensive exhilaration.

Wor brought the ship down in a sickening vertical drop, and as it touched the sand he half dragged her from the cushions. She had to run to match his long-legged stride as he approached the base of the globe.

"Come on, woman. Great Sasso waits!" he barked, hustling her through a portal where the globe touched the footprint-tracked sand. His eyes were blazing with hungry madness.

The globe was hollow, and inside space itself was different and *alien*. The exhilaration was overpowering now, yet terrifying, with its undertones of ancient and unnamable evil.

"Great Sasso is near!" Wor spoke in a hoarse whisper.

He pointed upward. "The Gateway of Sasso!"

Hanging overhead in the center of the sphere, not suspended in any way she could see, was an area of glowing greenish-yellow luminescence that hurt her eyes. She lowered them to the shimmering, scarcely visible transparent platform beneath it. Sin stood there almost as though floating, enveloped in a voluminous black robe from neck to heels. Her lips, parted in an anticipatory smile, looked black in the greenish light.

Beside and just below the platform stood a huge cylindrical vat, also made of transparent material but plainly visible because it was filled to the brim with some pale lavender fluid. Beside the vat rose a long-boomed hoist, the hook on the end of its chain now hanging empty, and attached to the wall of the vat was a complex mechanism of distorted tubes, warped helical coils and irregularly shaped boxes studded with knobs and handles. An elevated chair was provided beside the controls.

A network of glittering woven cables, branching and rebranching, lying in loops, littered the bowl-shaped floor in seeming disorder. But all led to the machine on the Vat. One cable, as thick through as a large man's arm, curved upward unsupported and vanished into the glow of the Gateway.

Several hundred people turned in silent expectancy as Wor entered. The men almost without exception wore uniforms and the women were sleek and well dressed. A quick glance showed Margaret that the more glittering decorations were gathered toward the center, nearest the Vat and the platform upon which Sin waited.

Wor guided her to the front rank, shoving roughly aside those men and women who did not clear his path rapidly enough. Stooping, he found the end of a cable and buckled the metal strap in which it ended around Margaret's wrist.

"What do I do?" she wailed in uncertainty.

"You will know, and then I will know more about you. But so will Sin, so be careful."

He left her and turned to inspect the seven naked, mindless slaves who stood in empty-eyed imbecility beside the Vat. He exchanged a few words with two soldiers who stood near. They chose a girl slave first, and at their command she meekly extended her hands. With the quick skill of much practice they linked her wrists together and slipped a loop of the binding over the hook of the hoist chain. The eyes of the watchers turned appraisingly upon the girl's lash-scarred body, their faces twisted with expectancy and hunger, as one of the guards forced the girl's head back and popped a small pellet into her mouth. She gulped and swallowed obediently.

Wor climbed to the elevated chair and took his place at the controls of the machine on the Vat. Sin looked down, nodded to him, and made a beckoning gesture toward the doorway.

From the outside came a procession of—things. The Luvans. They looked like oversized, unfinished caricatures of men, but their faces were utterly inhuman. Except for beady black eyes they were a fuzzy, pasty grey all over. Repulsive wart-like lumps sprouted all over their bodies. Ominous looking creatures, as alien to Varda as they would have been on Earth.

The leading Luvan climbed stolidly to the platform. Sin turned, unfastening and tossing aside her cloak. Her bare skin gleamed yellow-green in the Gateway's glow. Then she and the Luvan met in the middle of the platform and merged in an

indescribable way that stopped the breath in Margaret's throat, became one in a kinship of *alienness*. The faces of the watchers writhed in ugly loathing.

"Sasso comes! Great Sasso comes!" The words began as a mutter and swelled to a concerted roar that shook the sphere. It was a cry of exultation, but mingled with it was an unspoken, questioning longing strong enough to make itself felt.

"Tonight?"

THE GATEWAY was no longer formless light. *Something* was there. Margaret shuddered and had to lower her eyes.

The Sin-Luvan form on the platform leaped and *flowed* in wild contortions of a significance that made Margaret grow faint, yet held her enthralled. The thing in the Gateway became clearer in outline, larger, as though approaching from an immense distance. For an instant it seemed about to break the bonds of the Gateway, to enter into the world of Varda itself. An expectant, thrilled hum went up. Then the thing recoiled and the throng muttered in disappointment.

Sin spread her arms and arched her nude body backward, a living green-ivory statue as she gazed up into the Gateway. And the thing—Sasso—twisted as though communicating with her by its motions.

The priestess made a slight motion to Wor. Instantly his hands moved, Margaret had almost forgotten the cable attached to her wrist, but as Wor touched his levers force flooded her body. For a few seconds it was excruciatingly painful, as if it were liquid fire, but gradually through the pain she felt *alive*, fully and abnormally alive. She was acutely aware of every fiber of her body, of each separate hair, each pore of her skin, each muscle and tendon and bone.

That too changed, became an ecstasy of utterly alien vileness that overwhelmed and submerged her own consciousness. She was no longer herself alone. She was a part of Great Sasso and yet herself more than ever. She was powerful, and nothing was impossible or wrong. Only for an instant did she struggle, more startled than inherently repelled by the strange sensations. Then she surrendered herself completely and utterly—and gladly. She was

floating in the exultation of an alien, unguessable obscenity. She had become Of the Faith.

And in that *oneness* many things became clear. She knew that Sasso the Conqueror, Sasso the Incomparable, came from afar to bring his boon to the Faith of Varda. And she knew that the machine and its cables were merely a temporary expedient, until Great Sasso should burst through the Gateway to his destined supremacy. Then They of the Faith, like Sin, the high priestess who was already old in the service of Sasso, could *merge* and become one more directly.

And she knew what bonds barred Great Sasso's way. The inimical thoughts of the Rebels, those ungrateful wretches who had not only rejected Sasso the Wonderful but through the concerted power of their thoughts managed to do *something* to prevent the passage of the Supreme One through the Gateway. The Rebels must be destroyed! They must! They must! Her only wish was that Sasso *come through*. She could sense the thoughts of Sasso's other worshipers, their intense desires so exactly like her own.

But *oneness* with Sasso was not without cost. She could feel herself weakening. Her knees sagged and her vision blurred.

Sin at last gave Wor a signal. The flooding force stopped abruptly and Margaret sank weakly to a sitting position. Around her many others did likewise.

The slave girl's thin scream of despair caught Margaret's attention as Wor touched the controls and the hoist raised her, swung her over the Vat. She was no longer a mindless automaton as she was lowered toward the seething lavender fluid, but a human fully aware of her impending doom. Margaret watched in horrified fascination.

The girl screamed again as her feet touched the surface, this time in agony, and drew her legs up in a convulsive spasm. Slowly, inexorably Wor kept lowering her. She screamed again and this time was unable to raise her legs clear.

Deeper and deeper she was plunged into the pale liquid. The slave girl seemed to dissolve as she touched, for although Margaret could see through the transparent Vat no part of her body was visible below the surface. Finally the screaming stopped.

The girl had vanished utterly. Wor raised the empty hook.

The cable and wristband led a new force into Margaret's body, a force that left her refreshed, replenished. The worshipers around her straightened and their dulled eyes grew brighter. Even the nebulous image of Sasso within the Gateway glowed with a more vivid fire, as though he too had *fed*.

Then once more the power of Sasso flowed, bringing dreams. Alien dreams—dreams of vileness so deep it became enthrallingly beautiful—dreams of conquest, world after world—dreams of great and very precious rewards for those who were Of the Faith.

Again the form of Sasso bulged at the Gateway, and once more drew back. Angry frustration entered the projected dreams—and yet the knowledge that an eternity of ageless tomorrows lay ahead.

Through her trance Margaret sensed the grey and boneless form of a Luvan beside her. It touched her tentatively, then withdrew, and she could feel its thought.

"Not yet—but soon for this one."

Seven times in all a slave was awakened from mindlessness by a pellet of restoring drug and lowered into the lavender fluid of the Vat to feed the Sasso-entity and revive its worshipers with the very essence of life. To Margaret the slaves were not human beings at all. She was now Of the Faith.

And then the last dream faded. The Gateway dimmed to a formless yellow-green glow as Sasso retreated. Sin wrapped the cloak around her white body. The Observance of Sasso had ended. All around her there was an awakening, a stirring.

Wor left his place and pushed his way toward her. He eyed her approvingly, for he had been watching and had found her suitable. She had not resisted Great Sasso. But his brows were creased in thought.

OUTSIDE the fresh night air brought her brain to full activity, thrusting forward half-memories of things she had not consciously noticed during the Observance.

At one time, cutting through the *oneness* of the group, had come a thought of different, more penetrating quality than the

others. A thought not of the wondrousness of Sasso but of the beauty and desirability and irresistible attraction of Sasso's priestess. And she had seen Sin half turn, even in the very presence of that she worshiped, to locate its source. Oh, Victor was a sly one. Margaret frowned uneasily. His look when she chose Wor had been laden with malice, and he could become dangerous. Sin had been pleased by his thought.

Wor was silent until they were in the air.

"Soon—as soon as I am ready—the resistance of the Rebels will be crushed. Their forests can not protect them forever from the Forces that I, Wor, command." His eyes were alert for the effect of his words.

"Why don't you wipe them out immediately then?" Margaret asked, thinking of Sasso's coming through.

"For one thing, they are clever."

Something in his words made her realize he meant more than he had said, that his motives were not as simple as they appeared.

"You mean—?"

Wor looked at her searchingly. "One person, or two of opposite sexes, will acquire supreme power when Sasso comes through. Sin thinks because she is so old in the Faith that it will be she alone. But I have labored harder, devoted myself to the Faith even more wholeheartedly than she."

"But wouldn't that be treason against Great Sasso?" The thought left Margaret aghast.

Wor shook his head. "Sasso is far too great to care who receives the Power. With my knowledge of the Gateway and the Machine of Life, with your Earth brain that can project thoughts with such powerful intensity—"

"But—"

"Do you think you are safe?" Wor broke in angrily. "You are enough like Sin herself to know that she—" He did not need to complete his sentence. Margaret understood. She was well treated now—but Sin could change her mind.

"You and I—together," she agreed. Margaret was an ambitious woman.

With casual ease Wor landed on the fortress roof. Margaret started down the

ramp toward her quarters but the big man seized her elbow.

"No," he corrected. "This way."

IN THE MORNING Sin sent a messenger to Wor's rooms. The priestess of Sasso had known exactly where Margaret had spent the night. But she did not know of the things she and Wor had discussed in quiet whispers.

"Did you find Wor a satisfactory companion?" Sin greeted her.

Margaret eyed her steadily. "He's scarcely a mental giant," she replied. "A bit uncouth, but otherwise adequate."

The answer seemed to amuse Sin. "And did you like the Obseance of Sasso?"

"It's—it's—" Margaret was at a loss for words but her face betrayed the tremendous hunger to wallow once more in Sasso's alien vileness. "How soon again?"

Sin smiled at her enthusiasm.

"You are one of us now, and the inherent character of your Closed World brain will help overcome the Rebels all the sooner," she declared.

A nagging worry gnawed at Margaret's mind. "How about Victor?" she asked.

Sin's face became masklike and unreadable. "He has become Of the Faith too. He may amuse me—for a while. Something new, you know."

Margaret nodded. She dared not probe too deeply.

"Just remember that I am Sin, and that in Varda my word is law."

Margaret wondered whether the ruler was suspicious or had uttered the warning on general principles.

V

FOR SEVERAL DAYS KRASNA was out most of the time, and when home she was usually exhausted. Eldon was aware he was sharing her dwelling on sufferance only, because she pitied his maimed body and abysmal ignorance of this strange world, so in consideration he repressed most of the insistent questions pushing at his lips.

He spent many lonely, idle hours—when not indulging in orgies of self-pity—studying the scrolls he had found.

One dealt in scholarly fashion with the history of Varda, telling of a relatively

small but highly civilized group, the Superiors, and a much larger number of uncivilized, barbarian Puvas. Most of the scroll dealt with the efforts of the Superiors to teach the Puvas the arts of civilization. It told of a populous, fairly happy world with a highly integrated culture of which Eldon had seen no trace, and it ended abruptly in the midst of a discussion of the economic system. The ending puzzled him. It was so—unfinished.

Whenever he tired of reading he investigated the marvelous mechanisms the girl used so casually. They left him perplexed, for they had no manual controls and he could not make them work at all. He dared not go out, for the girl had warned him that for her safety as well as his own he should remain underground. She had not explained.

The luminous walls bothered him particularly, and finally he asked her about them. She seemed surprised he did not understand.

"Just put your hand on a wall anywhere, so," she directed. "Now think of light. With your Closed World brain you should have no trouble."

Nothing happened.

"Think harder," she admonished. "Believe it will shine."

After a dozen attempts a wall suddenly flared into brilliance at his thought and touch. After that it became progressively easier.

"But why? How does it work?" he asked, still a scientist.

She frowned. "The detailed knowledge was lost many man-lives ago, when the Luvans came through and caused the Collapse." There was bitterness in her voice. "But of course it is by thought."

Eldon asked what she meant by the Collapse. She shook her head sadly and refused to discuss it, but before going out again she pointed out a small scroll he had overlooked. It was hastily written, an incomplete and fragmentary continuation of Varda's history.

The progressive civilization of the Superiors had been interrupted by alien creatures, Luvans, who had opened a Gateway from another world. They were few in number and the Superiors had not realized their danger until they had corrupted several individuals—the first of

whom was a woman called Sin—to the worship of their vile deity. Then a deadly, devastating conflict had ensued, with those who refused to embrace the Faith at a terrible disadvantage.

For something in the nature of the Luvans had caused the Superiors' radiation-type power weapons to backfire whenever used near them. And with horror the Superiors had discovered that no matter how cut or bullet-punctured, the gross grey bodies of the Luvans repaired themselves within hours. They utterly refused to remain dead.

Most of the Superiors had been destroyed during the first few months. The survivors had been forced to scatter, taking to the forests.

Then the Luvans, lacking sufficient converts to establish an effective cell of their Faith and unable to corrupt more of the Superiors, had deliberately caused mutations to take place among the savage Puvas, breeding individuals more suited to their plans. The mutants were intelligent, but they lacked some of the Superiors' telepathic ability.

Eldon added up what he had read. Krasna was obviously one of the surviving Superiors, the hunted folk whose coordinated thoughts and mental powers held Varda against the Faith of Sasso. He remembered the lighted walls and the other devices without manual controls. Evidently thought was a tangible force here in Varda. Anxiously he awaited Krasna's return, one question uppermost in his mind.

HE blurted it out as soon as he saw her. "Will you take me to your people? Perhaps they could return me to Earth."

Her body grew rigid and she stared at him in a silence suddenly grown hostile. Her hand hovered momentarily over the deadly radiant blast rod in her belt.

Then her eyes misted and her lips trembled. He knew he had unwittingly inflicted a deep hurt upon her, that somehow his words must have sounded like a taunt. He did not understand why, but he felt deeply apologetic and tried to tell her so. Finally the unfriendliness died from her eyes, but the hurt remained.

"My people?" she said in bitter un-

happiness. "I have no people. I am an exile."

With an angry gesture she ripped her jacket aside, exposing the crescent-shaped red scar on her breast. "See this? It is the slave-mark of Sin."

Eldon stared blankly.

Jerkily, with words deliberately held to matter-of-factness, she told him. She had been captured by a raiding party of the Faith, gassed into unconsciousness, and had awakened in the slave pits beneath the Fortress of Sin. There she had been mistreated and tortured, dosed with a drug to reduce her to a mindless automaton, and in a bestial ceremony branded with the slave-mark. Her fate would have been eventual oblivion in the Vat.

But she had succeeded in poisoning herself before the drugs took full effect, and two mindless slaves under the direction of a mutant Puva guard had tossed her dying body on a rubbish heap outside the walls.

She had intended suicide, meaning to thwart the Faith, but a spying party of Rebels had found her barely breathing and rushed her to the Chamber, the only person ever to escape the clutches of the Faith.

"I went to the Thin World while the Chamber repaired the effects of the poison," she told him. "But even the Chamber could not remove *this*. Not so long as Sasso lurks at the Gateway."

Before Eldon could interrupt with questions she continued.

"They would have been kinder to let me die, even in the Vat."

The Forest People remembered the havoc traitorous adherents of the Faith had wrought among them, and would take no chances. Because she bore the slave-mark and was therefore suspect, Krasna had been sent into exile by the Council.

"The others can occasionally gather in small groups and fight their loneliness together," she sobbed. "But for two years they have even kept their minds closed against me. I'm completely alone, always."

Eldon felt a great longing to comfort the weeping girl. But even in her solitary exile she regarded him only as an object for pity, not as an equal and a friend. So there was nothing he could do but leave her alone with her grief. It made him feel more sorry for himself than ever.

NEXT DAY the alarm in the passageway hummed unexpectedly and Krasna leaped up as a man entered. His clothing was of the same blue-green material as hers, evidently intended to match the forest tints, and a bulging weapon belt encircled his waist. A long sword swung at his side, and he looked capable of using it well.

"Bolán!" Krasna greeted him with a happy cry and ran to his arms. He held her affectionately.

"How do you dare — ?" she asked through tears of joy.

The man made a disparaging remark about the Council. "After all, you are my sister."

Eldon felt a relaxation of the tension within himself. His hostility toward the man ebbed.

But Bolán glowered at the Earthman with black dislike.

"You certainly aren't helping yourself with the Council by keeping this Outworldling here," he told the girl. "You'd be well advised to send him into the forest."

"To die? But Bolán, he's harmless," the girl protested.

The man raised his eyebrows. "You think so? The other two *have not appeared in the slave pits*. You know what that means. And with their Closed World minds—"

Eldon interrupted in sudden anger. "Listen here. Margaret would never join that Faith. The man, perhaps, but not the girl. If she's there it is as a prisoner."

Bolán turned on him contemptuously. "Be quiet!"

Krasna intervened. "Your loyalty is touching—but I fear sadly misplaced," she said quietly.

Furious words surged to Eldon's lips, but Krasna refused to argue. She treated him like a sickly and petulant child. Enraged self-pity filled Eldon's mind. If he had both arms he'd show that big oaf a thing or two.

"Don't be a fool, sister, even if you have made a pet of this thing," Bolán said with brutal abruptness. "Get rid of him."

Krasna's mouth set in a stubborn line and her eyes flashed. Bolán shrugged, knowing the signs.

"There's a raiding party near," he

changed the subject. "I'm going to try an ambush."

At once the girl brightened. "I'm going too," she announced, gathering her weapons.

Bolan looked startled, then worried, and finally actually frightened.

"Don't worry," Krasna reassured him bitterly. "I'll go alone. I have no desire to be seen with you and make you an exile too."

"You know I don't believe—" her brother protested.

"Perhaps not. But the Council does."

Bolan went out first. Krasna followed a few minutes later with the lemur-creature riding upon her shoulder. Eldon was left alone with his own very unpleasant thoughts.

HE SLEPT, and was awakened by a skittering sound in the room. Silently he touched the nearest wall and *thought* light, and as the glow flashed he grabbed the dagger he had placed near. His breath went out in a sigh of relief, for it was only Tikta, and then with a shock he knew something was wrong.

He tried to catch the agile little creature, but it eluded him easily. Then he remembered Krasna's lessons about the power of thought. He sat down again and concentrated on the idea that he meant it no harm.

At last, with desperation overcoming shyness, Tikta made a leap to his shoulder. It had never come near him before. He sat perfectly still as the handlike little paws moved to his head, remembering how he had seen it communicate with Krasna.

The room was gone. A forest glade blurred, cleared, blurred again, shifted from colors to colorblind tones of grey, widened, narrowed, as though seen through changing sets of eyes, finally settled.

Krasna was there, writhing in the grasp of a pair of lumpy grey creatures who towered above her. Luvans. One was using a device that Eldon guessed was calling an aircraft to pick up the prisoner.

He pulled Tikta's paws away and instantly was back in the underground room. Tikta glared at him reproachfully as he sat on the side of the couch. His heart was pounding and he was caught in the grip of uncertainty.

Finally he rose and fumbled in one of the wall cupboards for the extra blast rod Krasna had left behind. He knew he had to at least try, no matter what the odds, but he moved reluctantly.

Tikta pulled at his trouser leg to attract attention, and Eldon remembered with a gasp of dismay. Power weapons such as the blast rod were worse than useless against Luvans. They backfired. Slowly he picked up the heavy sword the lemur-creature had laboriously dragged to the middle of the floor.

Tikta's chattering reached a frantic pitch. It leaped to Eldon's shoulder, clinging to his collar with one paw and pointing the way with the other in a manner almost human. The naked blade felt clumsy in his unpracticed right hand. All his life he had been left-handed, and he was no swordsman, and he was frankly frightened. But he had to at least try.

Huge butterflies flitted among the gigantic trees of the forest and rainbow-hued lizards raced over the rough bark, but Eldon hardly noticed. He was haunted by the vision of Krasna.

Tikta guided him straight to the clearing. It was not far. The two Luvans, indistinguishable duplicates of each other, still held the struggling Rebel girl between them.

Tikta leaped down in shrill, gibbering rage and raced ahead of Eldon to the defense of its mistress. One of the Luvans looked up unperturbed as Eldon tensed his muscles and forced himself to charge with sword swinging. One of them brought his knife hilt crashing down on Krasna's skull, and as she dropped unconscious both turned toward the Earthman.

Eldon staggered in mid-stride as his knees went rubbery with a chilling, unearthly fear surpassing his worst nightmares. His wrist drooped and his fingers were lax on the sword hilt. For an instant he came to a complete standstill, his body swinging involuntarily to run, and he knew himself as an arrant coward.

But, as he hesitated, through his terror seeped an impression of cynical *amusement*.

Then Eldon knew. Rage burned away panic. And with the rage came relief. He himself was not afraid—at least not that desperately afraid. The Luvans were



With a savage bellow Eldon leaped.

using a mental weapon against him, a lance of fear.

He took an unsteady step forward. Another. The third was casier, although his entire body still trembled. But now that he knew its cause the fear was less effective.

An expression that might have been amazement crossed the pasty grey features of the Luvans.

Eldon's sword slashed in a hissing arc, and as one Luvan moved sluggishly back it stumbled over Krasna's prostrate form. With a savage bellow Eldon leaped. His backswing bit deep. The Luvan's shapeless mouth opened soundlessly as blue-black fluid gushed from the wound.

Eldon's blade flashed bright in the sunlight as he brought it down again with all

the strength of his arm. Then it was no longer bright and the ugly grey body collapsed slowly.

But the second Luvan had prepared. One played hand held a dagger while the other grasped an evil-looking whip tipped with a cluster of hooked blades.

The Earthman almost sprawled as projected fear gave way to a momentarily successful attempt to confuse the coordination of his leg muscles. Then he screamed aloud as his body burst into flames and he had the illusion that mile up mile of empty space lay between him and the Luvan. But with an effort of will he plunged ahead, heartened by the growing sense of consternation he could read in the monsters thoughts. Any creature of Varda would have shriveled and died under the

Luvan's psychic barrage. But not the cripple from the Closed World of Earth.

The metal whip licked out faster than eye could follow. The blades of its tip grated against the bone of Eldon's forehead and a gush of blood poured into his single eye. He lowered his sword momentarily to clear his vision with the back of his single hand, and in that defenseless instant the Luvan struck.

He felt the dagger snick against a rib and plunge deep into his chest. Automatically his foot came up in a tremendous kick that sent the Luvan reeling back, unhurt but thrown off balance.

Eldon knew he was bleeding internally but as yet his shocked nerves refused to transmit the full story of pain to his mind. Minutes to live. Something clogged his throat as he panted, and he spat a goblet of red-tinged foam onto the moss underfoot. Punctured lung.

He swung in a wide, clumsy lunge that missed by feet. And then he staggered, sagged, barely saved himself from falling. His sword point dropped weakly.

He felt the wave of triumphant, cruel gloating as the alien creature stepped in for the kill. And that had been the Earthman's last desperate hope, that the thing's inherent bestiality would not allow it to stand back and wait for him to fall. His time was short.

With a supreme, final effort he brought the sword up in a whistling uppercut. And struck. The point bit into the Luvan's chest. Into its throat. Snagged against the creature's jaw. Eldon stiffened his arm and let his body fall forward. The double-edged blade sliced through flesh and cartilage, then met with lessened resistance as the point emerged.

Eldon fell, blood from his wounds showering upon the obscene carcass, but he went down with the elation of the kill still in his mind.

KRASNA moaned and opened her eyes as three men in blue-green emerged from the trees. "Bolan!" she gasped.

Her brother took one shocked look at the carnage, misunderstood, raised his sword above Eldon's bloody head.

There was no time to argue or explain. The sword was descending even as she snatched out her blast rod and fired.

Orange fire blazed. The sword went spinning away, torn from Bolan's fingers. But power weapons used near Luvans—even hacked and bleeding Luvans—invariably backfired, and where Krasna's right hand had been there was only a shapeless mass of mangled, heat-seared flesh. For an eternity everyone remained frozen by the unexpectedness of the blast rod's discharge.

"The exile!" one of the men whispered fearfully. "She is truly a Sasso-creature! Kill her!"

"Wait!" Bolan spoke as though dazed. "Why did you—?"

Krasna did not answer. Instead she seized the Luvan's dagger in her uninjured hand and carved a gaping cross-shaped gash in the chest of the carcass beside her. Through glazing eyes Eldon watched as she plunged her hand into the slimy, quivering mess and felt disgusted at her exhibition of rank savagery.

She brought her arm out, fouled and defiled to the elbow with the Luvan's evil-smelling blood. In her hand was a tiny glittering capsule. She tossed it to the ground. "Smash it!" she said weakly.

Uncomprehendingly one of the men crushed it beneath his heel. Instantly the bloated, obscene, mangled carcass vanished as though it had never existed. Even its spilled blood was gone. The men drew unsteady breaths and a look of awed understanding appeared on their faces.

"The other one!" Krasna writhed as pain from her blasted hand penetrated her consciousness. "I—can't."

Eager swords hacked at the remaining monster and eager hands pawed among the filth of its body.

"We have killed a Luvan!" One of the men shouted exultantly as the second capsule shattered under his foot and the second carcass disappeared. "We know their secret now."

Bolan had recovered from his stupefaction. "The Chamber!" he ordered. "Be quick!"

"But it is forbidden," a man objected. "She is an exile. The Council—"

"Damn the Council!" Bolan picked up his sword and brandished it. "To the Chamber!" he repeated. The man looked to where the two Luvans had been and nodded.

"Take—him." Krasna spoke with great effort. "He—must—be—El-ve-don."

"Both!" Bolan decided instantly. He whistled and three more Forest People emerged from the trees. One was a tall, rawboned woman who took charge of administering first aid while the men prepared makeshift litters.

Eldon knew he was dying, but he tried to speak.

"Be still!" the woman ordered without rancor, continuing her ministrations.

One of the men picked up a small furry bundle and deposited it tenderly beside Krasna. The lemur-thing whined softly and snuggled against her.

Eldon felt no pain as he was rolled onto a stretcher. He was too far gone for that. As everything grew dark Krasna was looking at him, and now for the first time there was no pity in her glance. Instead there was dawning admiration. Her thought reached him, bypassing his ears and entering his brain as a telepathic whisper.

"Call me. I will be near."

VI

DEAD. DEAD. NO BODILY SENSATIONS. No *being*. But still thought. The individuality of Eldon Carmichael looked without eyes, listened without ears. It was absolutely, utterly alone in *nothingness*. Nothing but terrible *aloneness*.

But something—someone—had said, "Call me." What? Whom? Shreds of memory began to coalesce.

"Krasna!" The individuality of Eldon Carmichael shouted without lungs or mouth. "Krasna!"

The nothingness was no longer quite so empty. A thought brushed his.

"Eldon? Where?"

"Here!"

"Think of your shape!" a thought commanded.

The individuality of Eldon Carmichael thought. Memory shreds were coagulating to remind him he had once had a body. This was not death. It was something else.

"Think of me—help me *form*!" The thought-appeal was urgent but unfrighted. "I can't alone."

"Krasna?" He sent out the wordless question.

"Yes!"

He remembered her as he had watched her bathing in the warm pool that flowed through her home. And then he could see her floating in nothingness beside him, tenuous at first, then solidifying. He saw her with a new three-dimensional clarity and depth, as though with two eyes. Instinctively he reached toward her—and his left hand clasped her right.

Krasna looked down at herself, at the crescent-shaped scar marring her loveliness, and winced.

"Even here I must bear that," her thought reached him. "Until Sasso is no more."

Confused memories were returning now, bringing horror of this unknown emptiness.

And then Krasna's thoughts were flowing around him protectively, soothingly—but not in pity. And her thoughts brought understanding.

They were in the Thin World, a—place—outside the more solid worlds. Here only thought had actuality. Their bodies here were nothing but thought-projections. And here they must remain until the Chamber had had its way with their torn, tortured *real* bodies, healing them. For such were the unique powers of the Chamber.

"But my arm? And my eye?" Eldon asked.

"You forgot you had lost them. Here you are as you think you are. And I—"

"Exactly as I have dreamed." The thought left Eldon's mind before it could be altered by his loyalty to Margaret and his desire to return to Earth.

Krasna glanced at him sharply, but she seemed not displeased. And there was gratitude in her thoughts. Gratitude and surprised admiration for the way he had come to her rescue without thought of his own safety.

"We must stay away from our actual bodies long enough but not too long," she told him. "Otherwise we could not return at all."

She read his questioning thoughts. "No. A Vardan mind can not take knowledge of the Thin World back. I can rememehr almost nothing of the time I was here after escaping the Faith.

"But you, with your Closed World brain, can perhaps do what I can not."

With his new knowledge Eldon under-

stood also that those crystalline capsules in the gross grey carcasses were the real essence of the Luvans. The bodies in which they had clothed themselves to live in Varda had been purely artificial.

"I learned the secret of the Luvans in the slave-pits of the Faith." Krasna's thoughts grew grim and bleak as she remembered the things to which she had been subjected there. Vardan memories could be carried into the Thin World, though not back again.

Eldon's thought-body drew hers close as they floated side by side in limbo, drew her to him comfortingly and protectingly to thrust those memories aside. He thought she should be soft and warm to touch—and she was.

She pulled away—after a time that could have been either a moment or an age—with a tinkling laugh and a change of mood.

"Time here is *different* and it will seem long before we can return," her mind said. "Let us build a world to our own hearts' desires and live there until—until you can destroy Sasso and the Faith."

"But—"

She ignored his protest.

"I will go back to the Chamber occasionally—it will be necessary—but if you with your tenacious Earth mind went it would be disastrous."

"Understand this once and for all," he warned her. "If ever I can return to my own Earth I shall do so. I am not your marvelous El-ve-don, and I have no intention of fighting this thing you call Sasso. Those Luvans were bad enough."

Krasna frowned. Then her look of disappointment gave place to a knowing smile.

There was a hint of a surprising idea. Just the faintest sort of hint—and then she closed her mind, half laughingly and half in seriousness. But tightly.

"Let's build our world," she said.

IT WAS a Godlike sensation to *think* a world. It changed with their thoughts, part Earth, part Varda, and part the solidification of the non-existent lands of dreams. There were groves, streams, mountains, plains. There were towns too, but these could be seen only dimly, indistinct in the distance, the men and women in them tiny figures without individuality.

Neither Krasna nor Eldon had formulated their ideas for an inhabited utopia concretely enough to fill in the details.

Krasna created for herself a wardrobe of wonderful gowns every fold of which draped in a perfection of beauty, and jewels of kaleidoscopic inner fires that shifted with her mood. After her hunted forest life in Varda she indulged her fancies to the fullest.

Eldon built a laboratory. He lavished concentrated attention upon it—and then it failed to give him the satisfaction he had expected. For he did not have to work to find solutions. He *knew*. Even the mysterious bound charges yielded up their secrets in minutest detail, and when he discovered his Earth theorizing about the close connection between interacting bound charges and life itself had been on the right track he felt no surprise. The experimental equipment he designed was worse than useless, answering so perfectly to his thoughts that he could make the needles of his meters swing by merely *willing* it. He gathered almost limitless knowledge.

Krasna asked about life on Earth, and occasionally Eldon created Earth scenes for her. Once he built a dream automobile, unhampered by the structural limitations of Earth materials, and any number of miles of broad highway. Everything but the traffic. Krasna was delighted at first, amused by the manually operated controls, but then she saddened as she remembered that once Varda had had its own system of roads. So Eldon erased the perfect automobile and perfect highway from existence.

Krasna looked at him peculiarly. She seemed almost afraid of him, so deep was her awe.

"You—you are most certainly El-ve-don!" she whispered. "Only El-ve-don could know how to do such a thing. My people will be grateful to you forever when you save us from Sasso."

Irrational anger stirred within him at her assumption. "No! I shall return to Earth as soon as I can—if I can. I am not El-ve-don."

Krasna was shocked. "Then some day Sasso will come to Earth."

Eldon shrugged, rejecting the thought, his mind still unwilling to believe in the very existence of Sasso.

Then it was time for her to visit the Chamber. Her thought-body *thinned out*, vanished.

Eldon found their private world dreary and dead without her. With the bright, vital waves of her personality missing there was no joy. He grew intolerably lonely, anxious for her return.

When she reappeared everything was right again in their self-created world. The news she brought was mixed. Their bodies were repairing satisfactorily, she reported, but outside the Chamber there was chaos and steadily deepening defeat for the Forest People. Many had been captured—she shuddered with horror—while others more fortunate had been killed.

Her eagerness to leave their dream world communicated itself to Eldon, but their reasoning was different. She was dedicated to the struggle against Sasso. He hoped with his newfound knowledge to escape the brutalities of Varda and return to old familiar Earth.

But the time was not yet.

Once more she went away and once more she returned, this time almost at once. "Eldon!" she wailed even as she materialized. "We must go back now!" "Why?" he demanded.

"Because The Night approaches. Two Earth minds aiding the Faith have disturbed the balance. My people can not hold the Gateway much longer."

"But—?"

"If we don't we shall be lost here forever!"

Suddenly Eldon's homesick longing for Earth gave way to hesitation. Here he was whole, not a cripple. There—

While Krasna's absences had shown him that to be alone for all eternity on this self-created world would be unendurable. Even a disembodied brain could—would—go mad from loneliness. And there was Margaret, a prisoner of the Faith. He had no choice.

"All right," he agreed reluctantly.

"Now!"

Instinctively he knew the way.

"Eldon! El-ve-don! Stay near me!" He sensed Krasna's appeal even as their thought-world crumbled back into the featureless opacity of limbo, and he responded amid the *nothingness*.

VII

THE IRREGULAR WALLS, ROOF and floor were crystals of all shapes and colors. Some glowed, shedding polychromatic light. He rolled over—his body responded with a heavy stiffness—and beside him lay the red-haired girl. This was the Chamber, a natural formation possessing strange characteristics possible only in Varda. In the Chamber they had cheated death by giving their bodies complete rest.

He moved his left arm. It moved! His breath went out in a sigh of happiness as he looked at it, his two eyes focusing with difficulty at first. It was less heavily muscled and the skin was white and tender. It looked *newer*. Here in the Chamber he had grown it like a—like a crawfish. And the mortal dagger wound had healed scarlessly.

Krasna opened her eyes and stretched. He looked over to see if she had fared as well.

She caught his look. Instantly her face flushed and she snatched up a cloak one of the rescue party had left beside her, wrapped it around herself. Eldon was surprised. The prudery of bodily modesty had seemed entirely lacking from her character. In her home she had always been charmingly natural and unembarrassed.

She saw he had discovered his new arm and eye.

"Pleased?" she asked.

He nodded vigorously, forgetting everything else.

He felt a pull, a tugging deep within himself. Krasna felt it too and jumped up.

"Come," she urged. "We must get out of the Chamber at once."

Together they climbed a crystal-lined passage so steep it was almost a shaft. His muscles felt stale, unused and stiff. They came out on the rugged slope of a mountain, high above the forest line, and the opening to the Chamber was a small black hole amid a cluster of boulders.

Eldon shivered in the chill wind after the tingling warmth of the Chamber, and Krasna drew her cloak more closely around the tattered remains of her clothing. There was a flash of movement among the rocks and Tikta came running, chattering happily. Krasna stroked its soft fur and the lemur-thing placed its paws on her head

in the way Eldon had learned meant mental communication.

He watched her face become set and grim.

"Things are going—badly," she said.

She hurried him down the jagged slope, telling him as they went that the Forest People were gathering. It was risky, an unprecedented move of desperation, for if any large numbers were killed or captured Varda's entire defense against Sasso would collapse. The Gateway could be fully opened.

But Krasna was unable to maintain the pace at which she started. She tired rapidly, and often they rested at her suggestion. She seemed clumsy, unsure of her footing, and frequently he helped her over the rougher places.

"Do you remember the Thin World?" she asked during one pause.

"N—no," he admitted. He could remember Earth and Varda, remember his battle with the Luvans. But about the Thin World he could recall only that there was such a—was it a place?

"But you must!" she wailed. "You must!"

"I don't," he insisted.

She sighed. "Perhaps it will come back to you."

FINALLY they were out of the mountains, the blue forest moss squeaking beneath their feet as they walked. Once they stopped for a brief sleep, and although Eldon found it uncomfortably hot on the forest floor Krasna kept her long cloak wrapped closely.

"Where are we going?" he asked, very tired of this hiking and of the girl's reproachful glances. Even the little lemuring seemed to stare disapproval at his lack of memory.

"To my people, of course. Perhaps they will allow me to return now. Every one of us will be needed to counteract the two Earth minds working with the Faith.

"Ugh!" Eldon grunted, furious over her reiterated hints that Margaret—his Margaret, for she had come to him that last night on Earth—was Of the Faith.

They continued walking in strained silence.

"Can't you remember anything?" she asked again, her lips trembling. "About

the Thin World? That you are El-ve-don?"

"No."

His tone was unintentionally sharp, for he was irked by his inability to remember. There was something — something he couldn't quite grasp. She responded by bursting into a flood of tears and he stared at her, astonished. She had seemed such a well-balanced girl, one who did not cry easily. And so healthy and active too. But now—

She was still sobbing intermittently when three heavily armed men stepped from among the trees and approached with swords and blast rods drawn.

Eldon tensed instantly at their hostile attitude, and though he was unarmed he prepared to resist.

But Krasna grasped his arm. "No. They are my people. We must go with them quietly."

With a guard on either side and the third behind they were hustled through the forest. Krasna stumbled occasionally and Eldon took her arm. They were not allowed to speak to each other, and the guards were so watchful they seemed almost afraid of their unarmed prisoners.

Once three tubular silvery ships like the one which had hunted Eldon on his first night in Varda cruised overhead in echelon formation. Instantly their guards forced them into hiding.

"Kill both if they signal," the leading guard directed.

Neither Eldon nor Krasna had the slightest intention of signaling the aircraft of the Faith, and with their captors they breathed a sigh of relief when the ships vanished in the distance.

Their hurried progress continued, with Krasna panting and stumbling. Perspiration beaded her face, but still she kept the heavy cloak around herself.

Finally one of the guards whistled and almost at once they were surrounded by armed men who stared at them in hostile silence for a moment, then forced them into a black opening at the base of a tree.

The tunnel smelled musty and unused and the huge underground room smelled the same. But the room was in use now, packed from wall to wall with Forest People.

Sudden silence fell as the captives were led in, and hundreds of eyes turned toward

them. Krasna gasped and her face grew pale.

"Oh, Eldon! They think we—"

"Be quiet!" one of the guards snapped, prodding her roughly in the back.

Eldon's fists clenched despite the swords ringing him in, but Krasna's look counseled to wait.

Something was very, very wrong with many of the Forest People. Their skins were red and raw and their bodies were swollen and bloated, as though they had been severely burned or were in the last stages of some dreadful disease.

A woman—she might have been good looking at one time—pushed toward them. Her feverish eyes were sunk deep in pockets of swollen flesh and her poor, distorted face twitched uncontrollably.

"You did this, red witch of Sasso—and you, Earthman!" Her voice was so cracked with hate that Krasna stepper back.

A middle-aged man put his arm gently around her, and she was sobbing and leaning heavily upon him as he led her away.

"Sasso-creatures!" he growled, his eyes flashing venom.

All at once Eldon realized he could read thoughts, just as Krasna had read his. He knew what these Forest People were thinking and his face went tight as he felt their concentrated hate. For every one of them believed that Krasna had been deliberately allowed to escape from the Fortress as part of the Faith's dark plot. Didn't she carry the slave-mark? And they were sure that he, Eldon, was as much Of the Faith as his two fellow-worldlings.

The ancient, white-haired man in charge of the meeting pounded for attention. He peered at the prisoners with searing loathing and spoke to Krasna.

"The Council erred when it sentenced you to exile," he declared grimly. "It should have been death. But this mistake which has cost so many lives will be rectified."

There was a growl of approval.

"And this Earthman—"

Krasna straightened. "This Earthman is El-ve-don!" she shouted.

For a moment there was incredulous silence.

"You lie, Sasso-creature!" screamed one of the bloated, dying men.

"Kill them! Kill them! Kill them!" the chant roared deafeningly from the low ceiling and the old leader made no attempt to stop it.

Krasna raised her arms high in a plea for silence. She got silence, sudden and complete, but in an unexpected way. For as she raised her arms the cloak fell open and the tattered and bloodstained clothing beneath hid little. There was a startled gasp from the crowd, then a hum of shocked comment.

But it was not her semi-nudity that caused the sensation. Her condition, the heaviness of her body, were obvious.

She saw that her secret had been disclosed.

"This man is El-ve-don!" Her voice was firm and defiant now, pitched to cut through the noise. "Though he has refused to save our world, which only he can do, Varda must have another chance."

Eldon was held in outraged motionlessness as an angry mutter spread.

"Forest People!" Krasna lifted her voice. "The Earthman is the father of my child—although he himself did not know it until now!"

Eldon wanted to shout a denial. But he understood why she had been so unsure of her footing descending the mountains, why she had tired so easily.

"This Earthman *could be* El-ve-don of the prophecy if he would. He will not. But some day—if the Gateway can be held long enough—perhaps our child will accept the burden its father has shirked. The child will inherit characteristics of a Closed World mind. It was all I could do for Varda."

Her voice broke in a sob.

Eldon read a thought in her mind, a thought intended for him alone.

"And besides, I love him."

His brain was awlwhirl. It was all utterly impossible. But his confusion was interrupted by a stir in the back of the hall. Bolan entered, shoved his way to the dais. He spoke to the old leader and there were cries of angry protest from those near enough to hear.

"But—" the old man began.

"A trick to regain our confidence," someone broke in loudly. "Even Luvans would be sacrificed to defeat us."

The old man spoke to Bolan again, and

Bolan turned to stare at his sister with disbelief changing to undisguised loathing.

"But she is the only one who knows the arrangement of the Fortress," he said aloud. "Kill her and you doom our attack to failure."

There was a babble of disagreement.

"I say this not as her brother—if she has chosen a mate outside our own People I hereby declare her no longer my sister—but as chosen leader of our attack."

Amid the ensuing uproar the old man made a gesture to the guards, and with his newfound telepathic ability Eldon caught the thought-command.

"Take them to the side rooms, apart from each other. We must consider this."

ALONE in a tiny cell Eldon tried to bring his whirling thoughts to order. Krasna had lied. She must have lied. Why? But for a moment her mind had been so open to his telepathic sense that lying was improbable. And—

He felt a sudden mental wrench, a dislocation, a twisting—a million ideas spun through his brain—and he *remembered*. Memories of the Thin World—those very memories whose lack had made Krasna cry so bitterly—all at once. They had been there all the time, but buried, and the quick series of emotional shocks had brought them to the surface. Gone was the irksome, nagging feeling that had made him speak so harshly to the poor girl, replaced by a sense of surety and power.

Krasna had returned to the Chamber, to their real bodies, while he had remained in the Thin World. It could have—must have—happened that way. He remembered the secret, knowing smile she had worn, and the hints he had detected in her mind. And thought was a powerful force in Varda, controlling material objects. And time in the Thin World was different, variable.

It had been her patriotic urge to give Varda a chance at no matter what cost to herself. But he suspected there was also a shrewd feminine attempt to involve him emotionally in the fate of her world. It was most disconcerting.

Then that other thought—that most surprising thought of all. So she loved him. So what? He had not encouraged her.

He tried to shrug it off, tried to tell

himself he had no responsibility whatsoever in the matter. But his heart spoke otherwise. He tried to grow angry at Krasna for the unfair advantage she had taken—and failed miserably.

HE MADE no resistance as he was led back into the hall. Memories of the Thin World, of the nature of interacting bound charges, were arranging themselves in his mind. And he understood how to use that knowledge. His was a triple mind with an understanding of Earth, of Varda, and of the Thin World. But somehow there was little satisfaction and no happiness in the belief that soon he could return to Earth.

The old man began, for the benefit of the crowd, with a lengthy explanation that there was still some doubt in Krasna's case. She had, after all, given them the Luvans' secret, and she was necessary to the plan to infiltrate the Fortress and assassinate the leaders of the Faith. But still she bore the slave-mark.

"She will be kept under guard and her mind will be intensively probed," the old man announced. "The child with the Earth taint will be destroyed at birth."

"No!" Krasna shrieked. "No!"

Eldon felt a twinge at her frantic, pitiful cry, but he hardened his heart and did not face her.

He did not wait for the inevitable death sentence to be pronounced upon him. He turned away, almost casually, and walked toward the passage. He must find Margaret, attend to the matter of Victor, and then return to Earth. And he must go first to the dread Fortress of Sin, for he would have need of the Gateway.

But he was filled with a deep sadness for Krasna and her—their—unborn child.

At first the Forest People did not guess his intention, for he screened his thoughts. Then two warriors leaped to block his path with upraised swords. Eldon *thought*, and for the fragment of time it took to pass them they remained immobile. A knife whistled toward his unprotected back. He *felt* it coming and with incredible swiftness whirled and caught it in midair.

"Up! Up! Higher!" Eldon concentrated as a blast rod was drawn somewhere behind him. The sizzling lethal charge passed over his head and tore a gaping scar in

the plastic ceiling as the aim of the operator was disturbed by his penetrating thought.

He risked one look at Krasna. She was struggling to tear loose from her guards and follow.

"El-ve-don!" she called. In her voice was the anguish of one who has lost hope.

Then he ran, knowing that as soon as the Forest People recovered from their surprise he would be no match for their massed mental powers.

VIII

MOTTLED SPLOTCHES of tree-filtered sunlight flashed across his body. He ran, wishing he had not looked back at Krasna, guiding himself by the sun, and when he grew tired he used his new knowledge to postpone fatigue. His body would have to pay a price later, but for that he was prepared.

He knew now that he must inevitably come into conflict not only with the Faith, but with the Sasso-thing itself. For Sasso held the Gateway. He smiled wryly to himself as he considered fragmentary plans. Perhaps he was El-ve-don after all.

The forest thinned to allow glimpses of the Mountains that Move, and then he was clambering up the same barren, rock-strewn slopes he and Krasna had descended so slowly together.

He found the entrance to the Chamber without difficulty, for that black hole among the rocks was fixed indelibly in his memory. Then he had to drive himself, push himself step after lagging step down the steep tunnel until he stood amid the warmth and polychromatic glow of the crystal-lined grotto. He felt his spirit, his *self*, float free from his body. It was like swimming in a riptide, requiring a conscious and constant effort to hover near and not be swept out again into the Thin World.

And then, deliberately, Eldon's *self* did strange and terrible things to the body that lay crumpled on the rough floor. There was a psychic pain that ripped and tore at the *self*, more intense and poignant than any purely physical torment, and it continued for a timeless age.

When at long last a body staggered up

the tunnel its left arm was a stump and one eye blinked and squinted in a ruined, disfigured face. By his own choosing he was outwardly as he had been during those last unhappy months on Earth. The mental changes were invisible.

Above the Chamber the mountains grew steeper, rougher, and to an already exhausted cripple the difficulties were almost insuperable. Time after time he narrowly avoided rock slides loosened by the constant earthquakes, and there were ledges where the slightest misstep meant death, and crevices from which noxious, choking fumes puffed in irregular spurts. And always there was the howling, shrieking wind that strove to wreck his precarious balance and send him tumbling to destruction.

He wished he had an antigravity egg. With time and proper facilities he could have constructed one. He understood how. But he was not in the Thin World and could not produce one from nothing merely by thinking about it.

And he could not have used it anyhow. It was necessary that his maimed body be tortured almost to the point of collapse. The Gateway must be reached through Sasso, and Sasso could be reached only through the Faith. But one who was Of the Faith could not be false to Sasso.

Scratched and bleeding, half-frozen, his shoes worn through and the palm of his single hand shredded by jagged rocks, he crossed the summit and made the long descent to the semi-desert plateau on the other side. Near the bottom a small stream trickled across the rocks, and Eldon drank deeply although the water stank of chemicals leached from the volcanic core of the range.

The domain of the Faith was huge, and for three days he plodded across the drifting brownish sands. His breath whistled noisily in a throat parched with thirst and seared by alkali dust. Beneath the tattered remains of his shirt his ribs showed starkly through weather-scoured, sun-blistered skin, but he welcomed the emaciation and each scratch of the cactus-like plants. It was all necessary.

As the merciless sun rose for the fourth day he sighted a column of mist ahead. In the afternoon he topped a slight rise and looked down upon a small lake steam-

ing in the brazen sunlight. On its shore two dozen mud and wattle huts huddled together for mutual protection. A settlement of the primitive Puva tribesmen, the original non-mutants. Eldon hid in the scanty shade of a boulder and slept a couple of hours.

Then he stood up, allowing the setting sun to outline him. It was only a minute before a savage saw him and gave a shout. Still Eldon stood in plain sight, and soon thirty Puvans armed with clubs and spears were racing toward the stranger who had dared invade their territory. To their primitive minds stranger and enemy were the same.

Eldon waited until they were near. Then he *thought*, and a moment later smiled to himself as he passed undetected within a few feet of the tribesmen seeking his blood. His peculiar Earth mentality, coupled with the control he had learned in the Thin World, made him completely invisible to the Puvans. But he knew well it was a trick which would never work against mentalities that were more nearly his equal.

Beside one of the huts he found a crudely made clay pot of water. He drank his fill and threw the remainder of the water over a Puva woman. She screamed. He shattered the pot at the feet of another woman who ran to investigate. Then he trotted away, leaving the village in turmoil behind him, trusting the wind-whipped sands to obliterate his footprints.

All night long he plodded steadily eastward toward the Fortress of Sin. Near morning he threw himself down on the sand, this time making not the slightest effort at concealment.

THE whistling ships appeared with the grey of dawn, heading for the Puva encampment. The first passed high and to the south, but as the second approached Eldon opened his eye, lurched to his feet, staggered a few steps. He did not look up as the sound of the ship changed. Then he let himself sink limply to the sand.

The ship skidded to a stop nearby and through a slitted eye Eldon watched two men emerge. Men—mutant Puvans of the Faith—and not Luvans. He allowed himself a sigh of relief before feigning unconsciousness.

One of them rolled him over with a booted toe.

"Hey, Thordan," he said to his companion. "It's the crippled Outworldling that Highness Sin ordered us to watch for."

"But how could this have—" Thordan began.

"Those Puvans!" The other mutant sounded disgusted. "They saw this thing; and when he hid from their clumsy searching they sent that false alarm that the Rebels had crossed the mountains. Superstitious fools!"

Thordan nodded and examined Eldon critically. "Bah! Who'd want such an atrocity as a slave? Not me! Let's blast it here and not dirty our ship."

"Blast it and you'll carry lash scars," the other warned. "That thing is—was—an Earthman."

"All right. Throw it in and let's get back," Thordan agreed sourly.

"And don't give it food or water either," the other reminded. "Highness Sin, or perhaps Lesser Highness Margaret may have other ideas."

Something inside Eldon died at the casual mention of Lesser Highness Margaret. The words did something Krasna's hints and the open accusations of the Forest People had failed to do. They convinced him, brought into sharp focus all the half-thoughts and doubts he had so resolutely pushed aside.

THE ship landed and Eldon was half-led, half-dragged across the courtyard of the Fortress and into Sin's audience hall. There he was given a final shove, tripped at the same instant, and made involuntary prone obeisance to the dark-haired woman on the throne. He had just time to notice with a start how closely she resembled Margaret.

Sin looked down in questioning contempt. Eldon could feel her mind probing tentatively at his and deliberately made incoherent thought-pictures of burning sands and torturing thirst, of howling savages with blood lust in their eyes, of the trembling hell of the Mountains that Move. He invented scenes of being hunted through an endless towering forest by murderous people. To set up a complete mind block would only have called attention to his ability.

Sin's mind displayed increasing interest at those pictures, so he took his thoughts back to Earth and reproduced the nightmarish, multiform and utterly horrible and meaningless images of morphine and delirium which had haunted him in the hospital. He had the satisfaction of feeling her mind withdraw in fastidious disgust.

"His mind is gone, Highness Sin?" a hulking, much-decorated warrior asked.

Sin nodded. "Curse those Rebels. He is of no value in this condition."

Wor nodded. "Could his mind be restored?"

"Not worth it," Sin decided. "It would be a tedious task, I fear. A third Closed World mind for the Faith would have made the victory simpler, but no matter." She shrugged.

"The Rebels still die under the new weapons?" she asked her military chief.

"Yes, Highness Sin," Wor responded. "It will end soon now. Shall I—?" He made a snapping motion with his hands.

Sin shook her head. "Not so quickly, Wor." She raised her voice slightly. "Margaret, do you want this thing?"

Eldon resisted the temptation to turn, for that would have betrayed that he understood every word.

Margaret's voice came clearly from behind him.

"No!" she declared, her tone indicating revulsion at the sight of his maimed ugliness and the grime that clung to his blood-flecked skin.

Then quickly she changed her mind.

"For the Faith, Highness Sin—yes. He was always a fool, but with proper care perhaps enough of his mind can be restored to hasten The Night."

"Granted." Sin sounded pleased at Margaret's devotion to the Faith. "This idiot creature could not possibly be El-ve-don. But have your slaves take it out of my sight. It sickens me."

Eldon heard the girl he had once loved give an order, felt himself lifted and carried. A few minutes later, still feigning semiconsciousness, he was deposited on a soft bed.

"What do you want with this thing?" It was the big man Sin had addressed as Wor, and he sounded suspicious.

Margaret answered calmly. "As an unexpected aid to our plans."

"How?"

"Victor hates me since I chose you. Now Sin has taken a fancy to him. She will use him against us—if she suspects. And we both know Sin is dangerously clever. But I hope we can use this one—against Sin through Victor."

"But can you be sure—?"

"This one will do whatever I say." Margaret laughed confidently. "But remember, Wor dearest, for a while Eldon must be my only love. Now leave me alone with him."

The big man muttered an oath.

"Jealous? Don't be stupid, Wor. This should be a real surprise for Sin."

ELDON lay motionless, the slow, unsteady rise and fall of his chest the only sign of life. But his brain was alert. He heard the tantalizing sound of water being poured. A vessel was held to his lips and water dribbled into his mouth. It took all his control to keep from gulping greedily, and he had not had nearly enough when Margaret took the glass away.

Once more there was water, this time mingled with perfumed soap on a soft cloth as she washed the dirt from his face. Once he had delighted to have this woman near him, but now it was all he could do to suppress a shudder. Whenever her hands touched his skin he could feel that she was Of the Faith in a manner possible only through her own free will.

She snipped the tattered remains of his clothing away and applied a soothing ointment to his cuts and scratches. He thought he understood why she did not leave such ministrations to her slaves. She wanted his first waking thoughts to be of her love and solicitude. His lips almost thinned angrily.

He waited until she was growing impatient before he opened his single blood-shot eye. And then he held his face blank and empty.

"Eldon," she whispered softly, in English. "Eldon, it's me, Margaret. The girl who loves you."

"Margaret?" His voice was thick and hoarse, and that was not acting. Thirst had left his throat cracked and dry.

"Poor Eldon!" Her tone was soothing, caressing. "What did those nasty Rebels do to you?"

Eldon twisted his face in an idiotic grin. He giggled insanely, and when she tried to touch him drew back like a frightened animal. He muttered vaguely of horrors.

"Poor Eldon," she said again, and kissed him. With his increased sensitivity it was all he could do to keep from retching as her lips touched his. But he clung to her with his one shaking arm as though begging her protection.

At last he lay back and gradually his trembling subsided.

Margaret bent over him. "Victor is here," she said slowly and distinctly. "You remember Victor. He tried to kill you. I tried to save you. Now you must get well and kill Victor. You hate Victor, just as you love me."

Eldon whispered obediently. "Yes, I must kill Victor!"

He found himself wondering why normal people so often speak to invalids and cripples as though they were feeble-minded. He knew full well that if his body had been whole and well Margaret would have been more careful and Sin would have been much more thorough in her examination. This tendency to discount the mentality of a cripple was particularly strong when the victim was full of irrational fears and whining self-pity. All Eldon's hopes rested upon this simple psychological fact.

"You must sleep now, lover," Margaret crooned. She gave him a pill and a swallow of water. "This will make you feel better."

He let his body relax as though drifting into slumber. He could not hear her footsteps on the deep, rich carpeting but the swish of her gown and the soft opening and closing of a door traced her movements. Quickly he removed the pill from his mouth and tossed it through the open window. Sleep he needed, but drugged sleep he could not afford.

A MURMUR of voices came from the next room. Silently Eldon rose and pressed one ear to the door.

Margaret was speaking. "Great Sasso! That thing clung to me like a slobbering baby. But he'll be easy enough to control, especially—"

"Careful! Want him to hear us?"

"It wouldn't matter. He couldn't un-

derstand a word. Besides I gave him a control pill."

"But we don't want to make a mindless slave of him," Wor remonstrated.

"Of course not," Margaret assured her alien lover. "He'd be useless that way. The drug will only paralyze his will so he will believe unquestioningly anything we tell him, and you can see that he does not receive the mark that would make him a complete slave of the Faith."

"Ssh!" Eldon heard the big warrior whisper. "I thought I heard—" A chair creaked and there were footsteps.

Silently but with utmost speed Eldon threw himself on the bed.

"You're nervous as an old woman," Margaret complained.

Wor's voice was deep in his throat. "One lives longer that way when plotting against Sin," he declared.

Eldon was lying on his back, breathing raspingly through his open mouth. Wor gave a satisfied grunt as he closed the door, and almost at once Eldon had his ear to the panel again.

"Ugh! What an ugly sight! How can you stand having that thing near you?"

"When the stakes are the control of a world one can endure much," the woman said evenly. "And it should not be for long."

Wor chuckled softly.

"There is one more problem," Margaret continued. "He *must* be present on The Night."

"An idiot Outworldling at an Observance! Impossible! Highness Sin would never permit it," Wor objected.

Margaret's tone sharpened. "Are you or are you not commander of the Forces? And aren't you clever enough to invent a story? Perhaps that a mild administration of life-essence from the Vat could restore enough of his mind to give you information on the Rebel defenses, and thus hasten The Night."

Wor gave a low whistle of appreciation. "It might be arranged."

Eldon had heard enough, but still he had no plan. He must improvise in accordance with developments.

About failure he did not dare to allow himself to speculate. Even El-ve-don could fail—if he were really El-ve-don. And the price of failure he must keep from

his mind lest it confuse his thoughts at a moment when he would need all his powers.

But now the deliberate self-torment of his body had served its purpose, and well. To carry it further would be stupid. Carefully he closed his mind against telepathic probing and prepared for sleep.

But his last thoughts were not of his own safety, not of the disheartening shock of discovering that Margaret was not a prisoner but was Of the Faith, not of vengeance on Victor. He thought instead of poor Krasna as he had last seen her, and of their unborn child—the child she had hoped would one day save Varda—doomed to die at birth. He cursed himself for a fool while his mind groped in hopeless longing.

IX

GRADUALLY HIS BODY recovered. After the first day or two Margaret tired of the menial tasks of caring for his wants, as he had expected, and turned them over to her mindless slaves. But first she assured him carefully that it was all perfectly right and normal, and Eldon, supposedly under the hypnotic influence of the drug, nodded docile, unquestioning acceptance.

The slaves, two men and two girls, all carried crescent-shaped scars upon their chests, duplicates of the one marring Krasna's loveliness. One of the men had the racial characteristics of the Forest People. The other three were Puvvas, evidently of the non-mutant group. Carefully Eldon suppressed the wave of indignant sympathy they aroused in him, and almost as though he too were mindless submitted as they rubbed his abraded skin with healing ointment, fed him, brought him clothes at Margaret's command, dressed him.

But Margaret did not abandon him. Each day she visited him and sat near him, often touching him. Her hypocritical, saccharine attentiveness was so revolting that at times it was all he could do to maintain his dazed, semi-idiotic pose. She spent the hours planting suggestions in his supposedly vacant mind—about trusting her implicitly, about obeying no one else, about preparing to exact a blood revenge from

Victor. Sasso and the Faith she did not mention.

At intervals she brought him more pills. After a terrifying experience in which she remained with him so long that a small portion of the drug dissolved in his mouth and left him unable to think for hours afterward he adopted the expedient of tucking a small strip of cloth beneath his tongue to absorb his saliva and keep the pills from melting before he could spit them out. Just one would seal his doom—and that of Varda.

He was glad now of the long hours he had spent reading Krasna's scrolls. One had been a medical treatise and the mental control he had acquired in the Thin World enabled him to dilate the pupil of his single eye, slow his pulse, and counterfeit the drug symptoms exactly.

On the sixth day Wor visited him, alone.

"Stand up!" he commanded. He spoke a queerly accented English, evidently learned from Margaret.

Eldon obeyed.

"Turn around... Bend over... Walk to the door... Now come back."

Eldon obeyed the warrior, although Margaret thought she had conditioned him to take orders from no one but herself. The time for a showdown was not yet ripe.

"Turn on the lights," Wor directed crisply.

Eldon hesitated.

"Turn them on!" Wor bellowed.

Eldon looked blank. It had been a trap, for the lights were mentally controlled. Wor tried another trick.

"Catch!" He pulled a blast rod from its holster and tossed it. Eldon caught it, but clumsily.

"Fire it out the window."

The weapon differed from the blast rods of the Forest People. This one had a button, evidently a trigger, while Krasna's had been entirely controlled by thought.

Eldon was sorely tempted. It would be so easy to whirl and burn Wor down. But he resisted the impulse, knowing he would have only one chance and must make it really count. And perhaps the weapon was not charged. Wor was not altogether a fool. He pretended stupid unfamiliarity with the device.

Wor appeared satisfied that Margaret had not been arranging some scheme of her own.

"We will teach you to use this weapon later," he said. "You will use it to kill Victor."

That gave Eldon his first ray of hope, a foundation upon which to build a plan.

Wor's eyes narrowed with jealousy as he spoke the Earthman's name, and Eldon had overheard enough to understand why. Since Victor Schenley's arrival the officer had found himself with a formidable rival for Sin's confidences and attentions. A smaller, physically weaker rival, but sly, and one who could not be removed by force without incurring Highness Sin's wrath.

IT WOULD have been pointless to hide the recovery of his body, but the concealment of his true mental condition—that the experiences he had undergone had not left him a mind-blasted duncé and that he was not even under the influence of Margaret's drugs—was of supreme importance. One incautious moment and he would die speedily, for the leaders of the Faith feared one thing only, Elvedon, and if they suspected—

By a stroke of good fortune the room in which he was kept in luxurious captivity adjoined the larger one in which Margaret and her companion held most of their conversations. Eldon overheard everything, from endless plotting to love-making.

Wor boasted endlessly, egged on by Margaret's open adulation and flattery, of the deepening plight of the Rebels. The slave pits below the Fortress were filling rapidly. In fact so many Rebels were being captured that no more Puva slaves were being processed. Eldon clenched his fist in helpless anger, and a nagging worry began to haunt him.

One thing puzzled Margaret. Several of the Luvans had dropped out of sight.

"But they are not really of this plane at all," Wor dismissed the matter. "They are a law unto themselves."

Eldon guessed what was happening. He had seen the first two Luvans sent into nothingness by a bleeding, dying girl who had paid a great price in discovering their secret.

Several score of Wor's mutant Puva soldiers had been killed in running battles with Rebel bands, but Wor was not disturbed. He had ample fighting men at his disposal and the troops had been indoctrinated to believe that if killed in battle they went straight to Sasso. Margaret patterned her attitude upon his.

Eldon felt a surge of admiration for the scattered remnants of the Forest People who still fought against such overwhelming odds, even though their sullenly suspicious minds had condemned Krasna's unborn child—her child and his—to death. He could not blame them too much for being overcautious.

One night he overheard the critical conversation which meant this forced inaction would soon end.

Wor was singing as he entered Margaret's rooms, and despite the mutation which had increased his intelligence his savage Puva ancestry betrayed itself in the roaring vocal antics he considered music.

Margaret asked a sharp question.

"The next Observance of Sasso," Wor announced ponderously, "will be The Night!"

Eldon heard Margaret gasp. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as anyone can be. Those Rebels had the effrontery to gather again, to actually plan an attack against our Fortress. But we found their meeting place. It was a most effective raid."

Eldon felt a stab of fear, not for himself but for Krasna. Killed? Captured? Escaped?

"The attack is broken up?" Margaret asked.

"Yes. And there will be little more mental resistance either."

"Why?" Margaret asked as she was expected to.

"Because one of the prisoners was an old man whom I am certain was acting as their thought-coordinator." Wor laughed. "I, personally, slit his scrawny throat from ear to ear. Without a thought-coordinator their barrier can not last."

"Does Sin know?" Margaret asked anxiously.

"She has no idea." Wor was very proud of himself. "The Night should catch her off guard, and when that precious creature

of yours kills her Victor she will be un-receptive for the moment. Then I—we—shall receive the Power."

"What weapon?" Margaret inquired.

"A blast rod, of course. That way the backfire will take care of your creature too, automatically."

"You think of everything," Margaret said admiringly.

"Has Sin agreed that we bring him?"

"Not willingly," Wor admitted. "It was extremely difficult to persuade her."

"Why?"

"Because I couldn't let her guess how close The Night really is. I had to report failures and suppress news of victories. And after four man-lives of waiting Sin is impatient.

"Oh, the tongue-lashings she gave me. She called me stupid and incompetent and a strategic imbecile, and I believe if it weren't for memories of nights—memories of things that happened before she took that perverted fancy—I would have been relieved of command of the Forces."

"The ungrateful wretch, after all the victories you have won for her!"

"But she'll pay for those insults—soon. She finally gave her permission."

Margaret laughed, and then her voice became very prim and self-righteous. "It would serve her exactly right for treating you that way, Wor darling."

ELDON was never to know whether Highness Sin was suspicious or merely cautious. But while Margaret was away she came to see him. Victor accompanied her, dressed in a flashy uniform, an arrogant expression on his narrow face, very conscious of his position as chosen consort.

Eldon cowered, trembling and simulating fear and a total lack of recognition, keeping his real thoughts screened against Sin's mind and his disgust from finding physical expression. His heightened sensitivity made him acutely aware of what she was. At one time, before she had surrendered herself to an alien master, she had been just a woman. But not now. Her body was lovely enough, almost too lovely, but something *not human* had entered into it. And she was far older and more experienced in evil than any human had a right to be.

"Are you being treated well?" she asked in Vardan.

Eldon made a grunt of incomprehension.

Victor translated her question, but Eldon only stared. An expression of annoyance crossed Sin's haughty face.

She continued her questioning, with Victor translating, but received no intelligent response. Then she made a determined effort to read his mind, but he was on guard and screened his thoughts with the phantom images and chaotic emotions of mental disorder.

Then the high priestess of Sasso changed her tactics, spoke to him soothingly until he stopped trembling in fear. She put her arms around him, pressed her body close against his, and kissed him passionately full on the mouth while Victor glowered.

Eldon gave the she-devil her due. She was fiendishly desirable. There was something hypnotic about the insinuating motions of her body, the warmth of her skin, but Eldon's lips remained lax under hers and no light of desire kindled in his eye.

She shoved him brusquely away, convinced that he had lost not only his mind but his inborn, basic instincts.

"I doubt if we will gain any information from this thing," she said. "Come, Victor."

Without warning Victor struck at Eldon's unprotected face, a viciously unprovoked blow that sent him crashing to the floor. It took all his mental control to keep from leaping up and attacking the renegade, but he trembled and lay sobbing until they were gone.

The next day Wor and Margaret led him from the room for the first time, took him to an air car waiting on the roof, and flew him to a spot on the brownish desert away from all habitation.

The two instructors never dreamed their pupil was already familiar with the blast rod, as for a long while Eldon shivered at the spitting hiss of the discharge and consistently missed the desert shrubs they pointed out as targets.

"I'm afraid we'll have to use some other weapon," Margaret said at last.

"He'll learn, damn him," Wor growled. "We've been patient long enough."

Wor's educational methods consisted of brutal kicks and smashing punches in the

ribs. Eldon's progress became almost dangerously phenomenal. He knew he had to improve rapidly, before the plotters changed their plans.

For the blast rod was a bound charge weapon, and he suspected that by mental concentration he could change the resonant frequency of the discharge, perhaps modulate it properly. He would need it, and badly.

"For a one-eyed cripple without the brains of a crawling *sbedico* he does well enough," Wor conceded at last. "All he needed was firmness."

THERE was more tiresome waiting, nerve-wracking tense days of it.

And then one evening as the sun was setting Margaret entered and he knew instantly by her avid, *hungry* look what was to happen. Conditions of shifting coincidence between Sasso and the world of Varda were now favorable and Sin had commanded an Observance. But Eldon shared a secret with Margaret and the scheming military commander. This was to be more than another Observance. This was to be The Night.

A thrill of mingled fear and expectancy ran through him. For an instant his body straightened, but Margaret was too deep in anticipation of unholy ecstasy to notice.

"Come," she ordered.

A few minutes later he was in an air car screaming through the twilight at its utmost speed. They flew only a few minutes before Wor looked ahead, grunting a warning to his companion, and sent the machine plunging downward. Eldon uttered a squeal of fear.

Margaret turned in her seat and spoke in the Vardan language he was not supposed to understand. She was smiling and her tone was gentle, but her words were, "Just you wait. This is nothing to what will happen to you later."

Wor laughed uproariously at her little joke.

The huge black globe of the temple of Sasso loomed ahead, and as the uncanny emanations of the alien structure struck his mind Eldon was seized with panic. He, Eldon Carmichael, putting his puny knowledge and even punier strength against—*that!* He was almost overpowered by an urge to fill his lungs and shriek a death-

dirge for himself. But the effect on Wor and Margaret was entirely different. They were Of the Faith.

They landed among ranks of other parked air cars, in a space held open for Wor because of his rank. Eldon's arm was almost jerked from its socket in the eager haste with which Wor pulled him from the vehicle.

They entered the huge globular temple, and instantly Eldon felt the *strain* surrounding the formless hanging glow of the Gateway. It gave him a trace of reassurance, but he dared display no sign of understanding as he gazed at the tensely expectant people who were gathering.

"Margaret," he asked, his voice childishly high and naive. "What is this place? Why did you bring me here?"

Margaret leaned close. "To kill Victor!" she hissed in his ear. "See him over there?"

Victor stood at the base of the transparent, shimmering platform directly beneath the Gateway. For sheer magnificence of decoration his uniform surpassed even that of Wor. He outshone even Sin, who stood beside him, but there was about the priestess an aura of potent, evil power which the Earthman lacked.

Eldon allowed the scar tissue of his face to contort in a grimace of hate and took one long step forward. But Margaret's hand detained him and she smiled, well satisfied with her hate-conditioning.

"I will tell you when," she whispered. "You trust me completely."

The low-voiced hum of the Gathering of the Faith mounted to a new pitch and a cannibalistic leer spread over the faces of Sasso's devotees. The sacrifices were being brought in. A man in the throng bumped into Eldon. The Earthman allowed himself to be knocked off balance, and as he recovered he was facing the door. Without the bump he could not have turned, for that would have betrayed volition.

Only one guard accompanied the file of naked prisoners. One was enough, for the sacrifices were mindless ones, deadened to unquestioning obedience by drugs and the slave-mark of Sin. Two men, a woman, another man— and then Eldon's breath caught in his throat and the fingernails of his single hand cut into the flesh. For

the fifth in line was a red-haired girl whose unclothed body was no longer as slender and lithe as it had once been. Krasna! Krasna and her unborn child—their child—destined victims of the obscene Faith!

There was cruel amusement in the hum of the gathering, amusement and anticipation.

"Two lives at once," Eldon heard a woman remark to her companion. "I wonder what the vitality of the unborn one will be like."

Sin's eyes settled on Krasna and her lips drew into a thin snarl of recognition. This slave would never escape a second time.

IN AN INTUITIVE FLASH ELDON knew why he had deliberately ruined his restored body, tortured himself, placed himself in a position of deepest humiliation and direct peril. And it was not for a chance to escape to Earth. He would try to save Krasna—and their child—even if he jeopardized all Varda in the attempt.

But for the moment he could do nothing. The girl who stood so abject and robotlike beside the Vat was not really Krasna, his Krasna. Only during the brief interval before her vital essence was to provide sustenance for Sasso and rejuvenation for the entity's vile followers, only when she had been given the pellet which would restore her numbed mind, only then would he dare strike. And if she were chosen to be lowered into the Vat before Sasso's one vulnerable moment arrived—

Margaret picked up one of the cables that snaked in seeming confusion across the concave floor and eagerly snapped the band around her wrist. Wor picked up another cable end.

Eldon's heart sank. Even his Thin World was very inexplicit, but he feared that being coupled to Sasso through this mechanism would result in a transference that would transcend all mental blocks.

But Wor and Margaret had no desire that he be subjected to the full Sasso-force. That might destroy their carefully developed control over him. Margaret produced a square of flesh-colored fabric and wrapped it around his wrist before Wor

attached the cable. They had planned this all in advance.

"Give him the rod as soon as the Observance begins," Wor directed in a low voice. "But don't let him fire until the Gateway turns red. And hold enough of yourself aside so we won't miss our chance."

Margaret nodded understanding and Wor turned toward his place at the controls of the Vat, beside and below the platform which Sin was just mounting. The priestess looked down and the big man inclined his head to signify readiness.

A white hand emerged from Sin's enveloping black cloak, touched the fastening at her throat, and as the garment fell away she drew her slender white body erect and raised her arms in invocation to Great Sasso. The Observance had finally begun.

Eldon felt his scalp prickle as a huge grey shape appeared beside her on the platform. After a moment of symbolic gyrations the figures of the woman and the Luvan *merged*, seemed to interpenetrate each other and become something that still looked like Sin but was only partly human. He heard Margaret's indrawn breath, felt the psychic wave of her lustful, panting impatience, saw her face masked in unearthly expectancy as *something* took on nebulous outlines in the Gateway, throbbing evilly.

The guards bound the wrists of the first sacrificial victim, a girl, and at a touch of Wor's hands on the controls she was drawn up until her bare toes just touched the floor. There was a hush of tense expectancy as the restorative pill took effect, and then a satisfied whisper swept the gathering as she screamed and struggled in sudden horror. The glow of the Gateway brightened, shaded from green to yellow, and Sasso showed more clearly in all its alienness, glorying in the terror of the victim.

Wor's fingers flashed to the controls and a thrilled shudder shook the gathering as the Sasso-force flowed through the maze of woven cables. Eldon felt rather than saw Margaret's slender body, so exactly like that of the high priestess, shiver and go rigid beside him.

Then he was too occupied to notice. For the fabric around his wrist was not

a perfect insulator. His entire body tingled. His heart was pounding and blood raced through his body and throbbed in his temples under the leaking influx of the Force of Sasso. It was a terrible sensation, evil and yet compelling. The eerie waves surging through his brain called upon him to surrender, to give himself now and utterly and forever to the service of Sasso—for Sasso was the All, the Everlasting.

Almost he succumbed. But then for an instant his sight cleared and he looked upon Sin's cruel face, on the screaming girl who hung above the Vat in readiness for sacrifice, upon Krasna, the piquantly smiling face he remembered so well now dull with idiot emptiness. Soon she too would be screaming above the Vat.

The form in the Gateway pulsed, swelling and writhing, striving to *come through*. An intense crackling hum reverberated throughout the spherical temple. Around Eldon the devotees of the Faith were sagging and pitching to their knees as Sasso *used* their lives, drew upon them in an attempt to enter Varda. Eldon too felt his legs buckling, his mind block weakening, but managed to remain on his feet.

JUST as Eldon reached the point where his wracked nerves were shrieking for surrender she shot a meaningful glance at Wor. The big man's fingers flicked the controls and the pulsating waves of Sasso-force quieted.

High-pitched feminine screams cut the air as the hoist chain unreeled and the victim's feet touched the lavender fluid in the Vat. Her writhing body stirred the pale surface to foam as she was lowered. And then, while Eldon squirmed inwardly in impotent fury, she was gone. Only the cord that had bound her wrists remained. But there was nothing he could have done to save her without abandoning all hopes, all plans.

The restoring tide of the girl's vitality, the very essence of her life, poured through the cables at Wor's touch. In the Gateway the unbelievable, eye-straining shape of Sasso swelled and solidified, thrusting against the thought-barrier that barred it from Varda.

Even through the insulating fabric a tiny portion of the life energy reached

Eldon, strengthening him, steadying his reeling mind. It was a *human* force, the antithesis of that emanating from the alien monstrosity, and Eldon resolved that the Rebel girl should not have died entirely in vain. Quickly but unobtrusively he worked his shirt out of his trousers and touched the conducting wristband to the bare skin thus exposed. Instantly the life-current increased, filling him with a new vitality and a terrifying awareness of how crushingly irresistible the Sasso-force would have been in its full impact. The trick of the plotters had unintentionally saved his life and sanity.

All around him color returned to faces drained to death-like pallor by the alien entity. The panting, rasping breathing of the worshippers eased. Two guards stepped forward and the second sacrifice, a man this time, was prepared.

And then his throat constricted in fear. Sin was staring down at him, her eyes narrowed with suspicion. The priestess had been a Superior and was still a telepath! Eldon was afraid that in the throes of resisting the Sasso-force his mind block had slipped. He could only hope no clearly defined thoughts had leaked through.

She gestured to Victor and the renegade Earthman pranced forward, elated at this public attention. She said something to him and he turned toward Eldon, one hand dropping to the jeweled hilt of his ornate dagger. A gleam of joy appeared in his eyes.

Sin spoke further. A petulant, disappointed expression crossed Victor's arrogant face, but obediently he unbuckled his wristband, cutting himself off from Sasso. A buzz of curiosity began among the nearest watchers.

Sin cut it short with a nod to Wor, and Eldon moved his wristband away from his bare skin just in time as the Force of Sasso surged once more through the cables and into the worshippers. Then he was immersed once more in the struggle to retain his own individuality.

This time Eldon knew what to expect and so was better prepared to resist. During the first communion he had been vaguely aware of changes in the Gateway, and now he turned his single bloodshot eye upward, waiting for one particular moment.

The glow changed from green to yellow as once more the terrible entity thrust itself against the unseen barrier created by the thoughts of the surviving Forest People. The barrier weakened, gave, seemed about to snap, and through the cables came impulses of elation. *The Gateway shaded from yellow to pink.*

Ripping noises filled the air, sounds that were oddly familiar. Deliberately, risking his mental defenses to do so, Eldon concentrated upon making mental measurements which were in reality only enlightened guesses at the power and resonant frequency and other characteristics of the multiple bound charges constituting the Gateway.

Eldon felt a hard object thrust against his hand.

"Take it!" Margaret hissed. "Kill Victor! Now!"

With a great effort he forced his fingers to close around the blast rod, and deliberately he fumbled and almost dropped it. He could only stall for time now, for Krasna still stood passive and mindless beside the Vat, still a slave-creature of the Faith.

It was in that moment of perilous indecision that he realized just how deep and all-encompassing his feelings for her had become. He knew that if Sasso *came through* now the fate of Varda and perhaps of his own world too would be sealed. Yet to act immediately would doom the red-haired girl to death or a half-life of mindlessness. He hesitated.

Then he was granted momentary respite. One of the worshippers dropped to the floor. Then another, and still a third, Sasso surged against the invisible barrier, almost *came through*, then recoiled in temporary frustration. The efforts of the entity so drained its worshippers that fully half the group slumped awkwardly to the curving floor. The ruddy tinge of the Gateway faded back to yellow. A wave of malignant hatred poured through for all living creatures who did not acknowledge the overlordship of Sasso.

SIN saw and acted. Unconscious worshippers could not help Sasso *come through*. A nod to Wor stopped the force, and another caused the Rebel captive to be swung over the Vat and lowered. He

vanished in the lavender liquid without a sound, without a struggle, unwilling to give the bestial devotees of the Faith the satisfaction they craved.

Margaret's hand closed over Eldon's, thrusting the blast rod into his belt, hiding it beneath his loose fitting coat. A quick glance passed between her and Wor and the big man nodded almost imperceptibly. Almost. Next time.

The hook of the hoist swung back empty and the guards prodded the third victim into position. Quickly they tied her hands, placed a loop of the bindings over the hook, and one of them forced the drug that would counteract the slave poisons into her mouth. Eldon held his breath.

For the next to die would be Krasna.

THE GIRL gulped, then twisted her head as the counteragent took effect. She looked up to see Sin leaning from the platform, gloatingly awaiting her screams of hopeless terror. But in the moment of recovery she glared up at the priestess with eyes filled with loathing instead of fear.

Sin's mouth twisted with hate at the girl's defiance. Personal hate, for Krasna had injured her pride and her dignity by escaping from the slave pits. It had been an unforgivable affront, and now the high priestess flung taunting words at her victim.

Krasna's lips moved as though pleading for mercy and Sin bent lower to hear and enjoy. And then the Rebel girl turned her face upward and deliberately spat at her tormentor. Eldon's heart leaped in admiration. It was an unladylike but magnificent gesture of defiance and contempt. Sin jumped back, her face dark with rage, and nodded a signal to Wor. He seized the lever.

Once more Sasso-force pounded through the machine, more fiendishly intense than ever. Once more Eldon felt the ravings of the alien monster who sensed that this was The Night, and once more battled the overwhelming compulsion to abandon the unequal struggle and with his own thoughts help Sasso to *come through*.

Right then he almost died. He had forgotten Victor.

But Margaret had become sufficiently

adept to hold a part of herself aloof from Sasso's influence, and she saved him.

"Behind you!" she hissed. "It's Victor! Kill!" There was surprise and genuine fear in her voice. She had not expected Victor to come after Eldon.

Eldon abandoned all pretense and whirled.

Under other circumstances he might have enjoyed the disconcerted look that overspread Victor's narrow face. Victor, a few feet away, carried a dagger which he had obviously expected to plunge into Eldon's unprotected back without resistance, as Highness Sin had ordered. Sin's vague suspicions had been enough to order Eldon's death.

"The blast rod! Shoot him!" Margaret whispered urgently, and then she was tumbling aside to avoid the searing backfire of the weapon.

But the moment for which Eldon waited had not yet arrived.

Victor struck out. Eldon sidestepped. And then he fell, tripped by a loop of the cable attached to his wrist. Victor gave a hoarse cry of triumph and moved in. Eldon felt the slashing pain of a flesh wound.

"The blast rod, you fool!" Margaret cried.

But Eldon made no attempt to draw the power weapon. As he regained his feet he snatched a short, heavy sword from the belt of a subordinate officer who was so immersed in the Observance that he was only just becoming aware of the disturbance.

A frightened expression twisted Victor's mouth as he saw his adversary no longer empty-handed, but he knew by the vengeful gleam in Eldon's single eye that this time one of them must surely die. He still held the advantage, for the Force of Sasso confused Eldon's thoughts with alien impressions, interfered with his muscular coordination, drained his strength. And the cable attached to his wrist hindered his movements.

But Victor Schenley's own fear of this man he had crippled but twice failed to kill proved his undoing. One of his panicky lunges caught the cable—and sheared through it.

Eldon almost fainted as the Force of Sasso ceased and for a second his stomach

muscles contracted in a tight, cramping knot. But he was freed from Sasso!

The light of the Gateway gleamed red on Victor's weapon. But the renegade had forgotten to close his mind—if he had ever learned how—and with the Force of Sasso no longer confusing him Eldon knew exactly when and where and how the attack would come.

Victor lunged. Eldon swayed clear and caught Victor's dagger hand between his side and the stump of his amputated left arm. Before Victor could jerk free Eldon plunged his blade into Victor's throat.

There was a gurgling moan, the warmth and acrid odor of spurting blood, the clatter of Victor's dagger on the floor. It was over so suddenly that Eldon felt no thrill of revenge, no elation. For an instant he stared at the corpse, stunned. It was the first time he had ever killed a human.

A SCREAM spun him around. Krasna! In the brightening glare of the Gateway her body seemed afire as she swung above the terrible Vat.

With a bellow Eldon plunged toward the elevated chair upon which Wor sat, pushing aside the spellbound devotees of Sasso. He must stop the lowering of the hoist, and at once!

But he had forgotten Margaret.

"Eldon!" she screamed and threw her arms around him, pinioning his single hand at his side. Her pale face was inhuman with fury at the deception he had practiced upon her and fear of the deadly position in which she found herself. There could be no explanation. If Eldon did not kill her, Sin assuredly would.

Krasna shrieked again, this time in pain as her toes touched the liquid of the Vat, and even through the crackling, spitting crescendo Eldon heard her.

The short stub of his arm drew back, swung, and needles of fire raced through it as he struck Margaret's jaw. Her grip slackened and with a heave of his muscles he broke loose. He raised his sword—and knew himself for a sentimental fool. Earth repressions still in his mind would not let him kill a woman. Not even this woman.

The huge grey paw of a Luvan raked the side of his face and he weaved just in time to evade the clutching talons. Three of the monsters towered above him,

slow-moving but inexorable. Automatically Eldon threw his sword full into the face of the nearest and ducked beneath its outstretched arms.

Wor looked up from his controls with murder in his eyes and half rose in his seat to rasp his great sword from its sheath.

Eldon swerved aside, avoiding combat with the larger man. The hell-glow of the Gateway was deepening to crimson and the ripping crackles had reached a deafening pitch. Soon, too soon, Krasna would vanish in the Vat and Sasso would *come through*. His last chance would be lost if he allowed Wor to interfere.

With a clumsy leap he vaulted to the transparent platform of the high priestess. He leaned far over the Vat, reaching toward the hook from which Krasna swung. His one hand made pawing motions in the air. But the distance was too great.

Krasna saw him, guessed his intentions, and gave him a look at once appealing and resigned. Then her eyes opened wide at the sight of his maimed body. She turned her eyes upward to where the grossly incredible form of Sasso was *bulging* in the crimson light and shouted. Her words went unheard but Eldon received her thought. She was begging him to ignore her, to leave her to her fate and do whatever he could to halt the alien entity.

But that Eldon could not and would not do. Such a sacrifice would be worse than useless. The crimson tint of the Gateway, the crescendo crackling, the *bulging* of Sasso against the weakening thought barrier, all told him that Sasso needed only the additional strength of Krasna's life to *come through* in an unstoppable rush.

He crouched at the edge of the platform, measuring the distance as best he could with his single eye, and then the entire power of his legs was unleashed in a leap that carried him far out over the deadly Vat. His one arm stretched outward and upward. For an instant he thought he had misjudged and was plunging to destruction. Then his fingers touched the hook, clutched it, and he crashed against Krasna.

They swung together, pendulum fashion, carried in an arc by the force of Eldon's leap. Out away from the platform, toward

the other side of the Vat. Out, and then back again.

Eldon's legs reached, feeling for the narrow rim at the platform's edge. His toes touched it, slipped, held. His body stretched on a slant between hook and platform, every muscle strained, Krasna, shorter than he and unable to touch the ledge, dangled vertically over the Vat, but above the surface.

ABOVE THEM something in the Gateway glared malevolently down. Its silent call reached the high priestess who stood encrimsoned in the lurid glare with outstretched arms reaching in unclean yearning toward the thing to which she had surrendered her humanity. Until then she had been too deep in communion with Sasso to notice the Earthman.

But at Sasso's warning she spun about. A shrill sound of pure rage issued from her throat as she threw herself upon him. She was a harpy, an animal, her teeth and pointed fingernails punishing weapons. In silent fury she clawed and bit, trying to break his hold on Sasso's destined victim. And Eldon was too fully occupied to protect himself in any way.

Wor started up the platform, sword in hand, but Sin paused to wave him back.

"No!" she commanded. "At your controls! *Sasso comes!*"

Puzzled, his slow thoughts in confusion at the sudden shift in events, Wor obeyed.

Margaret too joined the fight, scrambling to the platform which would be the focus of Sasso's power. She had picked up Victor's jeweled dagger and with it she now lunged at Sin's back. But not to save Eldon. To save herself from Sin's vengeance and become ruler of Varda. For the Power would descend upon whom-ever Of the Faith occupied the platform.

The blade sank home to the hilt. Sin opened her mouth, but if she screamed it was lost in the swelling roar of Sasso's coming. The impetus of Margaret's rush carried the Black Priestess' body forward—toward the Vat.

Her body crashed against Eldon and his overstrained body gave way. His toes slipped from the platform's edge, and he and Krasna once more swung out over the Vat—while Sin's white form plummeted on down.

There was a dull splash—and Sin, Beloved of Sasso, was no more. *Nothing* settled through the evil lavender depths. The temple of Sasso was now in an uproar. Eldon and Krasna hung in slow-swinging arcs, and Margaret stood paralyzed, fingers taloned and shoulders raised.

Through the tumult she and Eldon's eyes met—and held. In what seemed to them both an age, their thoughts took concrete form. Margaret somehow realized that he was her sole obstacle now. Eldon would have to be removed before she could fill Sin's place.

Eldon, too—in this split-second that seemed eternity—had made his decision. From the Gateway came a sound that stopped the blood in his veins. Sin herself had furnished the final needed burst of life energy.

Sasso was *coming through!*

Margaret was evil. But Sasso was the greater evil. With all his Thin World knowledge, Eldon knew that the instant of balance was at hand, the time to strike and disrupt that balance of bound charges.

Margaret leaped forward as his swing carried Eldon and Krasna back toward the platform. She slashed with Victor's knife, slashed at Eldon's fingers.

The thrust was true. The edge bit into bone and severed cleanly. Eldon's mutilated hand slipped from the chains. And he and Krasna fell toward the Vat.

But even as he fell Eldon's hand drove down—what was left of it—and snatched the blast rod Margaret had placed in his belt. Falling, he aimed at the lurid flaming *thing* that was Sasso.

The Sasso-creature sensed his intention, turned its force into Margaret's receptive mind and drove her into a blind attack. With an inhuman scream she launched herself from the platform after Eldon, her dagger thrusting forward and down as she fell.

In midair Eldon pressed the button and with the supreme effort of his life ignored the frothing Vat below and the agony of the rod's backfire to concentrate the resonant power into the Gateway, into the terrible Thing solidifying there, and with Vardan control of mind over matter to warp the discharge of the particular frequency his Thin World knowledge told him was necessary.

A blazing cone from the rod sizzled and spat. The crimson glare of the Gateway flashed through the spectrum, exploded in a scintillating violet flare, and went black. There was the stunning crash of a world being tore asunder and through it an alien cry of rage—and of dawning terror.

In the upper hemisphere of the globe a group of white-glowing pinpoints appeared, arranged in a pattern that had grown familiar. The stars of Varda shining through! With incredible speed the rift in the temple of Sasso spread. Collapse!

As he plunged toward the Vat he knew he had won, knew he had found the proper modulation to disrupt the finely balanced system of resonant bound charges of the Gateway. And he knew the alien thing called Sasso had been caught between worlds, in *no world at all*, doomed to dwindle into the nothingness from which it had arisen by feeding upon stolen lives.

He felt one last wave of malignancy, a wave that faded and left only his own bodily pain. Then that too became indistinct even though his finger still stabbed the button of the ruined blast rod smoking red hot against his palm. And he was falling, not into the Vat but through limitless space.

The shattered remnants of the Globe and the Gateway dissolved in a tearing, melting sensation as though the very atoms of his being were rearranging themselves, a *strain* that made his mind shriek in torment and flee to the verge of madness.

There was a flashing glimpse of a grotto, of crystalline, polychromatic light and tingling warmth—the Chamber. Then that and the pain too was gone and he fell interminably through blackness.

SECONDS . . . hours . . . eons. And he struck with unexpected mildness on a hard, flat surface.

He opened one eye—and the other. He placed the palms of his hands—both hands—against the floor and pushed himself to a sitting posture.

The fluorescent lights of his own laboratory cast shadowless brilliance upon him. The charge collectors still whined, their pitch lowering slowly as he listened, and the air was still pungent with ozone. It couldn't be—or could it?—that only a

few moments of Earth time had elapsed?

A woman lay on the floor a few feet away, and he knew that he and she had both been near enough the neutral focus of the forces he had unleashed to escape destruction. And his arm, his eye—even the hand Margaret had so cruelly slashed—these parts of him had somehow in the transit between Varda and Earth his body had been made whole again.

He stared hard at the woman, for it was a different Margaret Matson, hardly recognizable. There were deep lines and wrinkles in her face and her revealing Vardan costume showed only too clearly how her once sleek body had become flabby and misshapen. In that last effort Sasso had fed ruthlessly upon its own worshippers, and his blast rod discharge had prevented their rejuvenation by lives stolen in the Vat.

While his mind was still adjusting itself he noticed the copper bar lying across the contacts of his experimental mechanism, and with Thin World knowledge he knew exactly what effect it had had upon the resonance of the bound charges. After a while he stopped merely looking and went to work.

He picked up a rod of nonconductive plastic and flipped the copper bar aside. Methodically he replaced blown fuses and threw in the circuit breakers controlling the bound charge concentrators. The hum rose rapidly. The machine was not seriously damaged.

A voice startled him.

"Oh! Eldon! You saved me!"

Margaret had regained consciousness. With grim amusement Eldon admitted to himself that she still thought rapidly and bluffed well. But he kept on working, not answering her.

"Eldon!" Her voice was impatient. He trembled slowly.

She smiled and held her arms out seductively, and the effect was indescribably grotesque. He felt a malicious urge to bring her face to face with a mirror. But she would discover her condition soon enough. He could look at her now without emotion. There was no longer any hatred in his mind, and no pity either. He turned back to work.

"Eldon! Speak to me!" Her voice trem-

bled between fright and anger. She was not used to being ignored.

But his mind was buzzing.

He knew he could easily be the foremost scientist of Earth, and although the miraculous restoration of his arm and eye would be hard to explain there could be prestige and wealth and power. Easily. Even though the inanimate materials of Earth, more refractory than those of Varda, would not respond directly to thoughts his knowledge could be modified and applied.

And he knew that for El-ve-don of Varda life would not be easy. A savage environment—the task of exterminating any of the mutant Puvas who had escaped—the even more difficult task of weaning the surviving Forest People away from the sullen suspiciousness that generations of hunted terror had made a fixed habit—leading and driving them to become the Superiors once more, the leaders of Varda. It would mean life-long struggle, discomfort and danger, exile from his home world, and work, work, work to start the world of his beloved once more upon the path toward civilization. And there would be those who would always view his efforts with suspicion, even hate and openly oppose him.

HE made intricate calculations with lightning speed and his hands obeyed effortlessly, adjusting the mechanism to limit its field of effect, setting up a deliberate overload that would reduce it to molten metal and shards of shattered glass and plastic. It would never do to leave this minor Gateway open now. Some day, perhaps...

Krasna, too, had been near enough to the neutral focus of escape, and all at once he knew with irrational surety that their child would be—twins.

He picked up the copper bar.

"Eldon! What are you doing?" Margaret cried.

He gave her a level stare. It would be a fitting and just punishment to leave her as she was. It would be more humiliating than death.

"I'm going home," he said quietly.

Then he dropped the bar across the contacts.