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AST-1E



THE ENCHANTED FOREST

BY FRITZ LEIBER

Elven was a scientist among a scientific people. But the Enchanted Forest was more than even his hard-headed training could stand. For time, or space, or something seemed bent in full-circle!

Illustrated by Miller

The darkness was fusty as Formalhautian Aa leaves, acrid as a Rigelian brush fire, and it still shook faintly, like one of the dancing houses of the Wild Ones. It was filled with a petulant, low humming, like nothing so much as a wounded Earth-wasp.

Machinery whirred limpingly,

briefly. An oval door opened in the darkness. Soft green light filtered in—and the unique scent, aromatic in this case yet with a grassy sourness, of a new planet.

The green was imparted to the light by the thorny boughs or creepers crisscrossing the doorway. To eyes dreary from deep sub-space the

oval of interlaced, wrist-thick tendrils was a throat-lumping sight.

A human hand moved delicately from the darkness toward the green barrier. The finger-long, translucent thorns quivered, curved back ever so slowly, then struck—a hairbreadth short, for the hand had stopped.

The hand did not withdraw, but lingered just in range, caressing danger. A sharp gay laugh etched itself against the woundedly-humming dark.

Have to dust those devilish little green daggers to get out of the wreck, Elven thought. *Lucky they were here though. The thorn forest's cushioning-effect may have been the straw that saved the spaceboat's back—or at least mine.*

Then Elven stiffened. The humming behind him shaped itself into faint English speech altered by centuries of slurring, but still essentially the same.

"You fly fast, Elven."

"Faster than any of your hunters," Elven agreed softly without looking around, and added, "FTL"—meaning Faster Than Light.

"You fly far, Elven. Tens of light-years," the wounded voice continued.

"Scores," Elven corrected.

"Yet I speak to you, Elven."

"But you don't know where I am. I came on a blind reach through deep sub-space. And your FTL radio can take no fix. You are shouting at infinity, Fedris."

"And fly you ever so fast and far, Elven," the wounded voice per-

sisted, "you must finally go to ground, and then we will search you out."

Again Elven laughed gayly. His eyes were still on the green doorway. "You will search me out! Where will you search me out, Fedris? On which of the million planets of the *sos*? On which of the hundred million planets not of the *sos*?"

The wounded voice grew weaker. "Your home planet is dead, Elven. Of all the Wild Ones, only you slipped through our cordon."

This time Elven did not comment vocally. He felt at his throat and carefully took from a gleaming locket there a tiny white sphere no bigger than a lady beetle. Holding it treasuringly in his cupped palm, he studied it with a brooding mockery. Then, still handling it as if it were an awesome object, he replaced it in the locket.

The wounded voice had sunk to a ghostly whisper.

"You are alone, Elven. Alone with the mystery and terror of the universe. The unknown will find you, Elven, even before we do. Time and space and fate will all conspire against you. Chance itself will—"

The spectral FTL-radio voice died as the residual power in the wrecked machinery exhausted itself utterly. Silence filled the broken gut of the spaceboat.

Silence that was gayly shattered when Elven laughed a last time. Fedris the Psychologist! Fedris the Fool! Did Fedris think to sap his nerve with witch-doctor threats and

the power of suggestion? As if a man—or woman—of the Wild Ones could ever be brought to believe in the supernatural!

Not that there wasn't an unearthliness loose in the universe, Elven reminded himself somberly—an unearthly beauty born of danger and ultimate self-expression. But only the Wild Ones knew *that* unearthliness. It could never be known to the poor tame hordes of the sos, who would always revere safety and timidity as most members of the human sos—or society—have revered them—and hate all lovers of beauty and danger.

Just as they had hated the Wild Ones and so destroyed them.

All save one.

One, had Fedris said? Elven smiled cryptically, touched the lock-et at his neck, and leaped lightly to his feet.

A short time later he had what he needed from the wreck.

"And now, Fedris," he murmured, "I have a work of creation to perform." He smiled. "Or should I say recreation?"

He directed at the green doorway the blunt muzzle of a dustgun. There was no sound or flash, but the green boughs shook, blackened—the thorns vanishing—and turned to a drifting powder fine and dark as the ashes carpeting Earth's Moon. Elven sprang to the doorway and for a moment he was poised there, yellow-haired, cool-lipped, laughing-eyed, handsome as a young god—or adolescent devil—in his black tunic em-

broidered with platinum. Then he leaned out and directed the dustgun's ultrasonic downward until he had cleared a patch of ground in the thorn forest. When this moment's work was over, he dropped lightly down, the fine dust puffing up to his knees at the impact.

Elven snapped off his dustgun, flinched sweat from his face, laughed at his growing exasperation, and looked around at the thorn forest. It had not changed an iota in the miles he'd made. Just the glassy thorns and the lance-shaped leaves and the boughs rising from the bare, reddish earth. Not another planet to be seen. Nor had he caught the tiniest glimpse of moving life, large or small—save the thorns themselves, which "noticed" him whenever he came too close. As an experiment he'd let a baby one prick him and it had stung abominably.

Such an environment! What did it suggest, anyhow? Cultivation? Or a plant that permeated its environs with poison, as Earth's redwood its woody body. He grinned at the chill that flashed along his spine.

And, if there were no animal life, what the devil were the thorns for?

A ridiculous forest! In its simplicity suggesting the enchanted forests of ancient Earthly fairy tales. That idea should please witch doctor Fedris!

If only he had some notion of the general location of the planet he was on, he might be able to make better guesses about its other life forms.

Life spores did drift about in space, so that solar systems and even star regions tended to have biological similarities. But he'd come too fast and too curiously, too fast even to see stars, in the Wild Ones' fastest and most curious boat, to know where he was.

Or for Fedris to know where he was, he reminded himself.

Or for any deep-space approach-warning system, if there were one on this planet, to have spotted his arrival. For that matter he hadn't foreseen his arrival himself. There had been just the dip up from sub-space, the sinister black confetti of the meteorite swarm, the collision, the wrecked spaceboat's desperate fall, clutching at the nearest planet.

He should be able to judge his location when night came and he could see the stars. That is, if night ever came on this planet. Or if that high fog ever dispersed.

He consulted his compass. The needle of the primitive but useful instrument held true. At least this planet had magnetic poles.

And it probably had night and day, to support vegetable life and such a balmy temperature.

Once he got out of this forest, he'd be able to plan. Just give him cities! One city!

He tucked the compass in his tunic, patting the locket at his neck in a strangely affectionate, almost reverent way.

He looked at the laced boughs ahead. Yes, it was exactly like those fairy forests that cost fairy-book

knights so much hackwork with their two-handed swords.

Easier with a dustgun—and he had scores of miles of cleared path in his store of ultrasonic refills.

He glanced back at the slightly curving tunnel he'd made.

Through the slaty ashes on its floor, wicked green shoots were already rising.

He snapped on the duster.

The boughs were so thick at its edge that the clearing took Elven by surprise. One moment he was watching a tangled green mat blacken under the duster's invisible beam. The next, he had stepped out—not into fairyland, but into the sort of place where fairy tales were first told.

The clearing was about a half mile in diameter. Round it the thorn forest made a circle. A little stream bubbled out of the poisonous greenery a hundred paces to his right and crossed the clearing through a shallow valley. Beyond the stream rose a small hill.

On the hillside was a ragged cluster of gray buildings. From one of them rose a pencil of smoke. Outside were a couple of carts and some primitive agricultural implements.

Save for the space occupied by the buildings, the valley was under intensive cultivation. The hill was planted at regular intervals with small trees bearing clusters of red and yellow fruit. Elsewhere were rows of bushy plants and fields of

grain rippling in the breeze. All vegetation, however, seemed to stop about a yard from the thorn forest.

There was a mournful lowing. Around the hillside came a half dozen cattle. A man in a plain tunic was leisurely driving them toward the buildings. A tiny animal, perhaps a cat, came out of the building with the smoke and walked with the cattle, rubbing against their legs. A young woman came to the door after the cat and stood watching with folded arms.

Elven drank in the atmosphere of peace and rich earth, feeling like a man in an ancient room. Such idyllic scenes as this must have been Earth's in olden-times. He felt his taut muscles relaxing.

A second young woman stepped out of a copse of trees just ahead and stood facing him, wide-eyed. She was dressed in a greenish tunic of softened, spun, and woven vegetable fibers. Elven sensed in her a certain charm, half sophisticated, half primitive. She was like one of the girls of the Wild Ones in a rustic play suit. But her face was that of an awestruck child.

He walked toward her through the rustling grain. She dropped to her knees.

"You . . . you—" she murmured with difficulty. Then, more swiftly, in perfect English speech, "Do not harm me, lord. Accept my reverence."

"I will not harm you, if you answer my questions well," Elven replied, accepting the advantage in

status he seemed to have been given. "What place is this?"

"It is the Place," she replied simply.

"Yes, but what place?"

"It is the Place," she repeated quakingly. "There are no others."

"Then where did I come from?" he asked.

Her eyes widened a little with terror. "I do not know." She was red-haired and really quite beautiful.

Elven frowned. "What planet is this?"

She looked at him doubtfully. "What is planet?"

Perhaps there were going to be language difficulties after all, Elven thought. "What sun?" he asked.

"What is sun?"

He pointed upward impatiently. "Doesn't that stuff ever go away?"

"You mean," she faltered fearfully, "does the sky ever go away?"

"The sky is always the same?"

"Sometimes it brightens. Now comes night."

"How far to the end of the thorn forest?"

"I do not understand." Then her gaze slipped beyond him, to the ragged doorway made by his duster. Her look of awe was intensified, became touched with horror. "You have conquered the poison needles," she whispered. Then she abased herself until her loose, red hair touched the russet shoots of the grain. "Do not hurt me, all-powerful one," she gasped.

"I cannot promise that," Elven told her curtly. "What is your

name?"

"Sefora," she whispered.

"Very well, Sefora. Lead me to your people."

She sprang up and fled like a doe back to the farm buildings.

When Elven reached the roof from which the smoke rose, taking the leisurely pace befitting his dignity as god or overlord or whatever the girl had taken him for, the welcoming committee had already formed. Two young men bent their knees to him, and the young woman he had seen standing at the doorway held out to him a platter of orange and purple fruit. The Conqueror of the Poison Needles sampled this refreshment, then waved it aside with a curt nod of approval, although he found it delicious.

When he entered the rude farmhouse he was met by a blushing Sefora who carried cloths and a steaming bowl. She timidly indicated his boots. He showed her the trick of the fastenings and in a few moments he was sprawled on a couch of hides stuffed with aromatic leaves, while she reverently washed his feet.

She was about twenty, he discovered talking to her idly, not worrying about important information for the moment. Her life was one of farm work and rustic play. One of the young men—Alfors—had recently become her mate.

Outside the gray sky was swiftly darkening. The other young man, whom Elven had first seen driving the cattle and who answered to the

name of Kors, now brought armfuls of knotty wood, which he fed to the meager fire, so that it crackled up in rich yellows and reds. While Tulya—Kors' girl—busied herself nearby with work that involved mouth-watering odors.

The atmosphere was homey, though somewhat stiff. After all, Elven reminded himself, one doesn't have a god to dinner every night. But after a meal of meat stew, fresh-baked bread, fruit preserves, and a thin wine, he smiled his approval and the atmosphere quickly became more celebratory, in fact quite gay. Alfors took a harp strung with gut and sang simple praises of nature, while later Sefora and Tulya danced. Kors kept the fire roaring and Elven's wine cup full, though once he disappeared for some time, evidently to care for the animals.

Elven brightened. These rustic folk faintly resembled his own Wild Ones. They seemed to have a touch of that reckless, ecstatic spirit so hated by the tame folk of the sos. (Though after a while the resemblance grew too painfully strong, and with an imperious gesture he moderated their gaiety.)

Meanwhile, by observation and question, he was swiftly learning, though what he learned was astonishing rather than helpful. These four young people were the sole inhabitants of their community. They knew nothing of any culture other than their own.

They had never seen the sun or the stars. Evidently this was a

planet whose axes of rotation and of revolution around its sun were the same, so that the climate was always unvarying at each latitude, the present locality being under a cloud belt. Later he might check this, he told himself, by determining if the days and nights were always of equal length.

Strangest of all, the two couples had never been beyond the clearing. The thorn forest, which they conceived of as extending to infinity, was a barrier beyond their power to break. Fires, they told him, sizzled out against it. It swiftly dulled their sharpest axes. And they had a healthy awe of its diabolically sentient thorns.

All this suggested an obvious line of questioning.

"Where are your parents?" Elven asked Kors.

"Parents?" Kors' brow wrinkled.

"You mean the shining ones?" Tulya broke in. She looked sad. "They are gone."

"Shining ones?" Elven quizzed. "People like yourselves?"

"Oh no. Beings of metal with wheels for feet and long, clever arms that bent anywhere."

"I have always wished I were made of lovely, bright metal," Sefora commented wistfully, "with heels instead of ugly feet, and a sweet voice that never changed, and a mind that knew everything and never lost its temper."

Tulya continued, "They told us when they went why they must go. So that we could live by our own

powers alone, as all beings should. But we loved them and have always been sorry."

There was no getting away from it, Elven decided after making some casual use of his special mind-searching powers to test the veracity of their answers. These four people had actually been reared by robots of some sort. But why? A dozen fantastic, unprovable possibilities occurred to him. He remembered what Fedris had said about the mystery of the universe, and smiled wryly.

Then it was his turn to answer questions, hesitant and awestricken ones. He replied simply, "I am a black angel from above. When God created his universe he decided it would be a pretty dull place if there weren't a few souls in it willing to take all risks and dare all dangers. So here and there among his infinite flocks of tame angels, sparingly, he introduced a wild strain, so that there would always be a few souls who would kick up their heels and jump any fences. Yes, and break the fences down too, exposing the tame flocks to night with its unknown beauties and dangers." He smiled around impishly, the firelight making odd highlights on his lips and cheeks. "Just as I've broken down your thorn fence."

It had been pitch black outside for some time. The wine jar was almost empty. Elven yawned. Immediately preparations were made for his rest. The cat got up from the hearth and came and rubbed Elven's legs.

The first pale glow of dawn aroused Elven and he slipped out of bed so quietly that he wakened no one, not even the cat. For a moment he hesitated in the gray room heavy with the smell of embers and the flees of wine. It occurred to him that it would be rather pleasant to live out his life here as a sylvan god adored by nymphs and rustics.

But then his hand touched his throat and he shook his head. This was no place for him to accomplish his mission—for one thing, there weren't enough people. He needed cities. With a last look at his blanket-huddled hostesses and hosts—Sefora's hair had just begun to turn ruddy in the increasing light—he went out.

As he had expected, the thorn forest had long ago repaired the break he had made near the stream. He turned in the opposite direction and skirted the hill until he reached the green wall beyond. There, consulting his compass, he set his course away from the wrecked spaceboat. Then he began to dust.

By early afternoon—judging time from the changing intensity of the light—he had made a dozen miles and was thinking that perhaps he should have stayed at the wreck long enough to try to patch up a levitator. If only he could get up a hundred feet to see what—if anything—was going to happen to this ridiculous forest!

For it still fronted him unchangingly, like some wizard growth from a book of fairy tales. The glassy

thorns still curved back and struck whenever he swayed too close. And behind him the green shoots still pushed up through the slaty powder.

He thought, what a transition—from ultraphotonic flight in a spaceboat, to this worm's-crawl. Enough to bore a Wild One to desperation, to make him think twice of the simple delights of a life spent as a sylvan god.

But then he unfastened the locket at his throat and took out the tiny white sphere. His smile became an inspired one as he gazed at it gleaming on his palm.

Only one of the Wild Ones had escaped from their beleaguered planet, Fedris had said.

What did Fedris know!

He knew that before Elven reached his spaceboat, he had escaped in disguise through the tremendous cordons of the sos. That in the course of that escape he had twice been searched so thoroughly that it would have been a miracle if he could have concealed more than this one tiny tablet.

But this one tiny tablet was enough.

In it were all the Wild Ones.

Early humans had often been fascinated by the idea of an invisible man. Yet it hadn't occurred to them that the invisible man has always existed, that each one of us begins as an invisible man—the single cell from which each human grows.

Here in this white tablet were the genetic elements of all the Wild Ones, the chromosomes and genes of

each individual. Here were fire-eyed Viana, swashbuckling Nar, soft-laughing Forten—they, and a billion others! The identical twins of each last person destroyed with the planet of the Wild Ones, waiting only encasement in suitable denucleated growth cells and nurture in some suitable mother. All rolling about prettily in Elven's palm.

So much for the physical inheritance.

And as for the social inheritance, there was Elven.

Then it could all begin again. Once more the Wild Ones could dream their cosmos-storming dreams and face their beautiful dangers. Once more they could seek to create, if they chose, those giant atoms, seeds of new universes, because of which the sos had destroyed them. Back in the Dawn Age physicists had envisioned the single giant atom from which the whole universe had grown, and now it was time to see if more such atoms could be created from energy drawn from sub-space. And who were Fedris and Elven and the sos to say whether or not the new universes might—or should—destroy the old? What matter how the tame herds feared those beautiful, sub-microscopic eggs of creation?

It *must* all begin again, Elven resolved.

Yet it was as much the feel of the thorn shoots rising under his feet, as his mighty resolve, that drove him on.

An hour later his duster disintegrated a tangle of boughs that had

only sky behind it. He stepped into a clearing a half mile in diameter. Just ahead a bubbling stream went through a little valley, where russet grain rippled. Beyond the valley was a small, orchard-covered hill. On its hither side, low gray buildings clustered raggedly. From one rose a thread of smoke. A man came around the hill, driving cattle.

Elven's second thought was that something must have gone wrong with his compass, some force must have been deflecting it steadily, to draw him back in a circle.

His first thought, which he had repressed quickly, had been that here was the mystery Fedris had promised him, something supernatural from the ancient fairy-book world.

And as if time too had been drawn back in a circle—he repressed this notion even more quickly—he saw Sefora standing by the familiar copse of trees just ahead.

Elven called her name and hurried toward her, a little surprised at his pleasure in seeing her again.

She saw him, brought up her hand and swiftly tossed something to him. He started to catch it against his chest, thinking it a gleaming fruit.

He jerked aside barely in time.

It was a gleaming and wickedly heavy-bladed knife.

"Sefora!" he shouted.

The red-haired nymph turned and fled like a doe, screaming, "Alfors! Kors! Tulya!" Elven raced after her.

It was just beyond the first out-



building that he ran into the ambush, which seemed to have been organized impromptu in an ancient carpenter's shop. Alfors and Kors came roaring at him from the barn, the one swinging a heavy mallet, the other a long saw. While from the kitchen door, nearer by, Tulya rushed with a cleaver.

Elven caught her wrist and the two of them reeled with the force of her swing. Reluctantly then—hating his action and only obeying necessity—he snatched out his duster for a snap-shot at the nearest of the others.

Kors staggered, lifted his hand to his eyes and brushed away dust.

Now Alfors was the closest. Elven could see the inch-long teeth on the twanging, singing saw-blade. Then its gleaming lower length dissolved along with Alfors hand, while its upper half went screeching past his head.

Kors came on, screaming in pain, swinging the mallet blindly. Elven sent him sprawling with a full-intensity shot that made his chest a small volcano of dust, swung round and cut down Alfors, ducked just in time as the cleaver, transferred to Tulya's other hand, swiped at his neck. They went down together in a heap, the duster at Tulya's throat.

Brushing the fine gray ashes fran-

tically from his face, Elven looked up to see Sefora racing toward him. Her flaming hair and livid face were preceded by the three gleaming tines of a pitchfork.

"Sefora!" he cried and tried to get up, but Alfors had fallen across his legs. "Sefora!" he cried again imploringly, but she didn't seem to hear him and her face looked only hate, so he snapped on the duster, and tines and face and hair went up in a gray cloud. Her headless body pitched across him with a curious little vault as the blunted pitchfork buried its end in the ground. She hit and rolled over twice. Then everything was very still, until a cow lowed restlessly.

Elven dragged himself from under what remained of Alfors and stood up shakily. He coughed a little, then with a somewhat horrified distaste raced out of the settling gray cloud. As soon as he was in clean air he emptied his lungs several times, shuddered a bit, smiled ruefully at the four motionless forms on which the dust was settling, and set himself to figure things out.

Evidently some magnetic force had deflected his compass needle, causing him to travel in a circle. Perhaps one of the magnetic poles of this planet was in the immediate locality. Of course this was no ordinary polar climate or day-night cycle, still there was no reason why a planet's axes of magnetism and rotation mightn't be far removed from each other.

The behavior of his last evening's hosts and hostesses was a knottier

problem. It seemed incredible that his mere disappearance, even granting they thought him a god, had offended them so that they had become murderous. Ancient Earth-peoples had killed gods and god-symbols, of course, yet that had been a matter of deliberate ritual, not sudden blood-frenzy.

For a moment he found himself wondering if Fedris had somehow poisoned their minds against him, if Fedris possessed some FTL agency that had rendered the whole universe allergic to Elven. But that, he knew, was the merest morbid fancy, a kind of soured humor.

Perhaps his charming rustics had been subject to some kind of cyclic insanity.

He shrugged, then resolutely went into the house and prepared himself a meal. By the time it was ready the sky had darkened. He built a big fire and put in some time constructing out of materials in his pack, a small gyrocompass. He worked with an absent-minded mastery, as one whittles a toy for a child. He noticed the cat watching him from the doorway, but it fled whenever he called to it, and it refused to be lured by the food he set on the hearth. He looked up at the wine jars dangling from the rafters, but did not reach them down.

After a while he disposed himself on the couch Kors and Tulya had occupied the night before. The room grew dim as the fire died down. He succeeded in keeping his thoughts away from what lay outside, except

that once or twice his mind pictured the odd little vault Sefora's body had made in pitching over him. In the doorway the cat's eyes gleamed.

When he woke it was full day. He quickly got his things together, adding a little fruit to his pack. The cat shot aside as he went out the door. He did not look at the scene of yesterday's battle. He could hear flies buzzing there. He went over the hill to where he had entered the thorn forest last morning. The thorn trees, with their ridiculous fairy-book persistence, had long ago repaired the opening he'd made. There was no sign of it. He turned on the tiny motor of the gyrocompass, leveled his gun at the green wall, and started dusting.

It was as monotonous a work as ever, but he went about it with a new and almost unsmiling grimness. At regular intervals he consulted the gyrocompass and sighted back carefully along the arrow-straight, shoot-green corridor that narrowed with more than perspective. Odd, the speed with which those thorns grew!

In his mind he rehearsed his long-range course of action. He could count, he must hope, on a generation's freedom from Fedris and the forces of the sos. In that time he must find a large culture, preferably urban, or one with a large number of the right sort of domestic animals, and make himself absolute master of it, probably by establishing a new religion. Then the proper facilities

for breeding must be arranged. Next the seeds of the Wild Ones pelleted in the locket at his throat must be separated—as many as there were facilities for—and placed in their living or nonliving mothers. Probably living. And probably not human—that might present too many sociological difficulties.

It amused him to think of the Wild Ones reborn from sheep or goats, or perhaps some wholly alien rooter or browser, and his mind conjured up a diverting picture of himself leading his strange flocks over hilly pastures, piping like ancient Pan—until he realized that his mind had pictured Sefora and Tulya dancing along beside him, and he snapped off the mental picture with a frown.

Then would come the matter of the rearing and education of the Wild Ones. His hypothetical community of underlings would take care of the former, the latter must all proceed from his own brain—supplemented by the library of educational micro-tapes in the wrecked space-boat. Robots of some sort would be an absolute necessity. He remembered the conversation of the night before last, which had indicated that there were or had been robots on this planet, and lost himself in tenuous speculation—though not forgetting his gyrocompass observations.

So the day wore on for Elven, walking hour after hour behind a dustgun into a dustcloud, until he was almost hypnotized in spite of his self-watchfulness and a host of disquieting memories fitfully thronged

his mind: the darkness of sub-space; the cat's eyes at the doorway, the feel of its fur against his ankle; dust billowing from Tulya's throat; the little vault Sefora's body had given in pitching over him, almost as if it rode an invisible wave in the air; an imaginary vision of the blasted planet of the Wild Ones, its dark side aglow with radioactives visible even in deep space; the wasplike humming in the wrecked spaceboat; Fedris' ghostly whisper, "The unknown will find you, Elven—"

The break in the thorn forest took him by surprise.

He stepped into a clearing half a mile in diameter. Just ahead a stream bubbled through a little valley rippling with russet grain. Beyond was a small, orchard-covered hill against whose side low, gray buildings clustered raggedly. From one rose a ribbon of smoke.

He hardly felt the thorns sting him as he backed into them, though the stimulus they provided was enough to send him forward again a few steps. But such trifles had no effect on the furious working of his mind. He must, he told himself, be up against a force that distorted a gyrocompass as much as a magnet, that even distorted the visual lines of space.

Or else he really was in a fairy-book world where no matter how hard you tried to escape through an enchanted forest, you were always led back at evening to—

He fancied he could see a black

cloud of flies hovering near the low gray buildings.

And then he heard a rustling in the copse of trees just ahead and heard a horribly familiar voice call excitedly, "Tulya! Come quickly!"

He began to shake. Then his hair-triggered muscles, obeying some random stimulus, hurled him forward aimlessly, jerked him to a stop as suddenly. Thigh-deep in the grain, he stared around wildly. Then his gaze fixed on a movement in the twilight grain—two trails of movement, shaking the grain but showing nothing more. Two trails of movement working their way from the copse to him.

And then suddenly Sefora and Tulya were upon him, springing from their concealment like mischievous children, their eyes gleaming, their mouths smiling with a wicked delight. Tulya's throat, that he had yesterday seen billow into dust, bulged with laughter. Sefora's red hair, that he had watched puff into a gray cloud, rippled in the breeze.

He tried to run back into the forest but they cut him off and caught him with gales of laughter. At the touch of their hands all strength went out of him, and it seemed to him that his bones were turning to an icy mush as they dragged him along stumblingly through the grain.

"We won't hurt you," Tulya assured him between peals of wicked laughter.

"Oh, Tulya, but he's shy!"

"Something's made him unhappy, Sefora."

"He needs loving, Tulya!" And Elven felt Sefora's cold arms go round his neck and her wet lips press his. Gasping, he tried to push away, and the lips bubbled more laughter. He closed his eyes tight and began to sob.

When next he opened them, he was standing near the gray buildings, and someone had put wreaths of flowers around his neck and smeared fruit on his chin, and Alfors and Kors had come, and all four of them were dancing around him wildly in the twilight, hand in hand, laughing, laughing.

Then Elven laughed too, louder and louder, and their gleaming eyes encouraged him, and he began to spin round and round inside their spinning circle, and they grimaced their joy at his comradeship. And then he raised his dustgun and snapped it on and kept on spinning until the circle of other laughers was only an expanding dust ring. Then, still laughing, he ran over the hill, a cat scampering in swift rushes at his side, until he came to a thorny wall. After his hands and face were puffing with stings, he remembered to lift something he'd been holding in his hand and touch a button on it. Then he marched into a dust cloud, singing.

All night he marched and sang, pausing only to reload the gun with a gleeful automatism, or to take from his pack another flashglobe of cold light, which revealed the small

world of green thorns and dust motes around him. Mostly he sang an old Centaurian *lied*er that went:

We'll fall through the stars, my Deborah,
We'll fall through the skeins of light,
We'll fall out of the Galaxy
And I'll kiss you again in the night.

Only sometimes he sang "Sefora" instead of "Deborah" and "kill" instead of "kiss." At times it seemed to him that he was followed by prancing goats and sheep and strange monsters that were really his brothers and sisters. And at other times there danced along beside him two nymphs, one red-haired. They sang with him in high sweet voices and smiled at him wickedly. Toward morning he grew tired and unstrapped the pack from his back and threw it away, and later he ripped something from his throat and threw that away, too.

As the sky paled through the boughs, the nymphs and beasts vanished and he remembered that he was someone dangerous and important, and that something quite impossible had truly happened to him. but that if he could really manage to think things through—

The thorn forest ended. He stepped into a clearing a half mile in diameter. Just ahead a stream gurgled through a small valley. Beyond was an orchard-covered hill. Russet grain rippled in the valley. On the hillside low gray buildings clustered raggedly. From one rose a thin streamer of smoke.

And toward him, striding lithely

through the grain, came Sefora.

Elven screamed horribly and pointed the dustgun. But the range was too great. Only a ribbon of grain stretching halfway to her went up in dust. She turned and raced toward the buildings. He followed her, gun still pointed and snapped on at full power, running furiously along the dust path, taking wild leaps through the gray clouds.

The dust path drew closer and closer to Sefora, until it almost lapped her heels. She darted between two buildings.

Then something tightened like a snake around Elven's knees, and as he pitched forward something else tightened around his upper body, jerking his elbows against his sides. The dustgun flew from his hand as he smashed against the ground.

Then he was lying on his back gasping, and through the thinning dust cloud Alfors and Kors were looking down at him as they wound their lassos tighter and tighter around him, trussing him up. He heard Alfors say, "Are you all right, Sefora?" and a voice reply, "Yes. Let me see him." And then Sefora's face appeared through the dust cloud and looked down into his with cold curiosity, and her red hair touched his cheek, and Elven closed his eyes and screamed many times.

"It was all very simple and there was, of course, absolutely nothing of the supernatural," the Director of Human Research assured Fedris, taking a sip of mellow Magellanic

wine from the cup at his elbow. "Elven merely walked in a straight line."

Fedris frowned. He was a small man with a worried look that the most thoroughgoing psychoanalyses had been unable to eradicate. "Of course the Galaxy is tremendously grateful to you for capturing Elven. We never dreamed he'd got as far as the Magellantics. Can't say what horrors we may have escaped—"

"I deserve no credit," the director told him. "It was all sheer accident, and the matter of Elven's nerve cracking. Of course you'd prepared the ground there by hinting to him that the supernatural might take a hand."

"That was the merest empty threat, born of desperation," Fedris interrupted, reddening a bit.

"Still, it prepared the ground. And then Elven had the devilish misfortune of landing right in the middle of our project on Magellanic 47. And that, I admit, might be enough to startle anyone." The director grinned.

Fedris looked up. "Just what is your project? All I know is that it's rather hush-hush."

The director settled back in his easy-chair. "The scientific understanding of human behavior has always presented extraordinary difficulties. Ever since the Dawn Age men have wanted to analyze their social problems in the same way they analyze the problems of physics and chemistry. They've wanted to know exactly what causes produce

exactly what results. But one great obstacle has always licked them."

Fedris nodded. "Lack of controls."

"Exactly," the director agreed. "With rats, say, it would be easy. You can have two—or a hundred—families of rats, each family with identical heredity, each in an identical environment. Then you can vary one factor in one family and watch the results. And when you get results you can trust them, because the other family is your control, showing what happens when you don't vary the factor."

Fedris looked at him wonderingly. "Do you mean to say—?"

The director nodded. "On Magelanic 47 we're carrying on that same sort of work, not with rats, but with human beings. The cages are half-mile clearings with identical weather, terrain, plants, animals—everything identical down to the tiniest detail. The bars of the cages are the thorn trees, which our botanists developed specially for the purpose. The inmates of the cages—the human experimental animals—are identical twins—though centuplets would be closer to the right word. Identical upbringings are assured for each group by the use of robot nurses and mentors, set to perform always the same unvarying routine. These robots are removed when the members of the group are sufficiently mature for our purposes. All our observations are, of course, completely secret—and also intermittent, which had the unfortunate result of letting

Elven do some serious damage before he was caught.

"Do you see the setup now? In the thorn forest in which Elven was wrecked there were approximately one hundred identical clearings set at identical intervals. Each clearing looked exactly like the other, and each contained one Sefora, one Tulya, one Alfors, and one Kors. Elven thought he was going in a circle, but actually he was going in a straight line. Each evening it was a different clearing he came to. Each night he met a new Sefora.

"Each group he encountered was identical except for one factor—the factor we were varying—and that had the effect of making it a bit more grisly for him. You see, in those groups we happened to be running an experiment to determine the causes of human behavior patterns toward strangers. We'd made slight variations in their environment and robot-education, with the result that the first group he met was submissive toward strangers; the second was violently hostile; the third as violently friendly; the fourth highly suspicious. Too bad he didn't meet the fourth group first—though, of course, they'd have been unable to manage him except that he was half mad with supernatural terror."

The director finished his wine and smiled at Fedris. "So you see it all *was* the sheerest accident. No one was more surprised than I when, in taking a routine observation, I found that my 'animals' had this gibbering and trussed-up intruder. And

you could have knocked me over with a molecule when I found out it was Elven."

Fedris whistled his wonder. "I can sympathize with the poor devil," he said, "and I can understand, too, why your project is hush-hush."

The director nodded. "Yes, experimenting with human beings is a rather hard notion for most people to take. Still it's better than running all mankind as one big experiment without controls. And we're extremely kind to our 'animals'. As soon as our experiment with each is finished, it's our policy to graduate

them, with suitable re-education, into the sos."

"Still—" said Fedris doubtfully.

"You think it's a bit like some of the ideas of the Wild Ones?"

"A bit," Fedris admitted.

"Sometimes I think so too," the director admitted with a smile, and poured his guest more wine.

While deep in the thorn forest on Magellanic 47, green shoots and tendrils closed round a locket containing a white tablet, encapsulating all the Wild Ones save Elven in a green and tiny tomb.

THE END