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All STORIES Complete



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Illustrated by Leo Ramon Summers and Ed Valigursky

When the empire of Myrmi-Atla beat back all attacks, there was only one weapon that might overthrow that world of women—a smooth-talking, hard-loving man!

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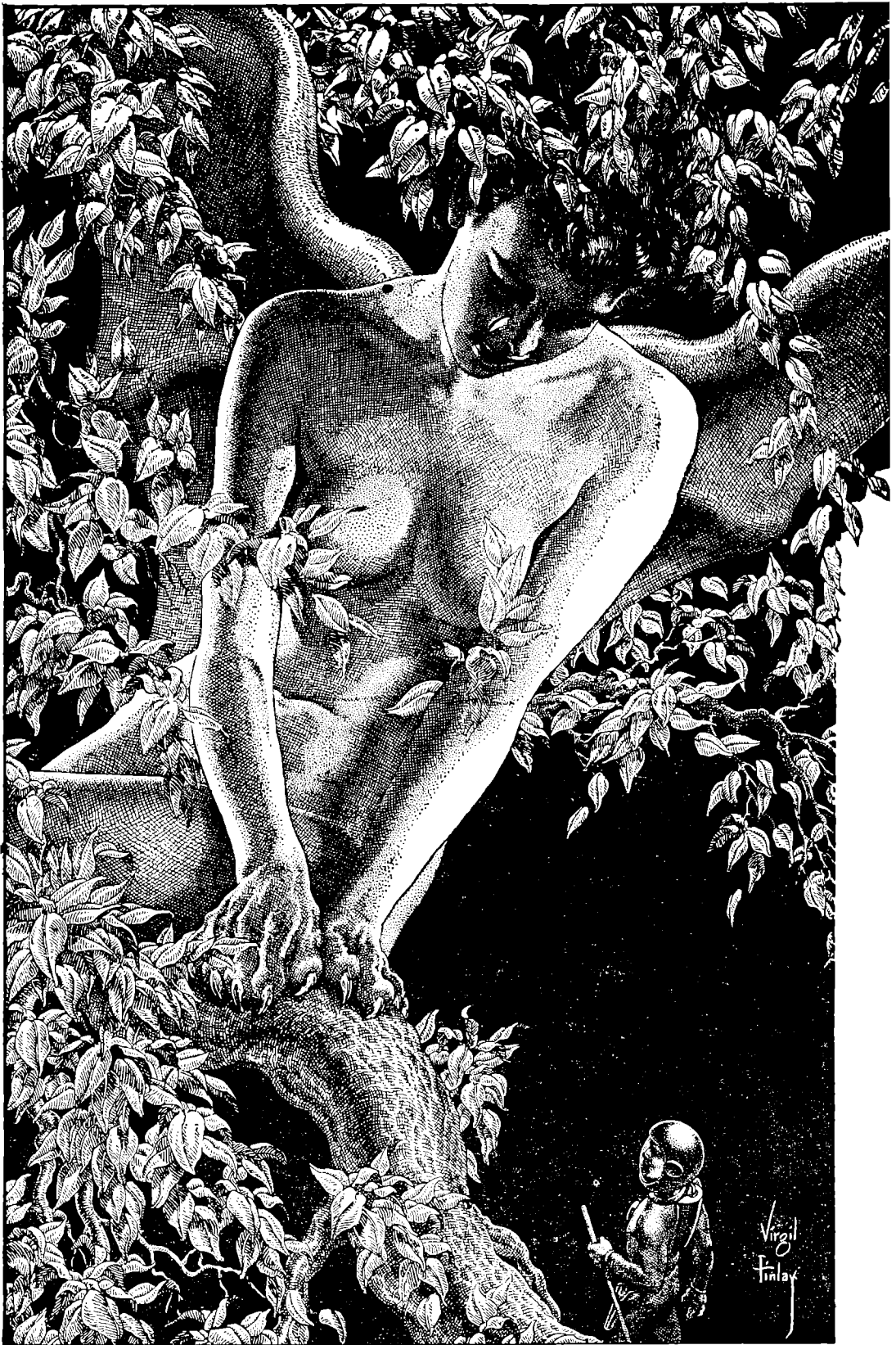
Have you ever wondered what our world, our solar system, even our galaxy will be like during the next, say, five hundred years? This article will tell you!

Front cover painting by Lawrence, suggested by

a scene from the story "Empire of Women"



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Unseen wings whispered among the foliage as the unsuspecting man passed by



The WORLD of WHISPERING WINGS

By Rog Phillips

Ted wanted to get back to Earth and hunt up a little fast romance. But he forgot things change after three thousand years!

“THREE THOUSAND hours to Earth,” Dr. Lansing said, “and we’ve been away three thousand years. Home..” He grinned, his blue eyes twinkling under his shock of iron-gray hair.

“Home?” Ted Grant said. “Maybe it was to my great-great-etcetera grandpappy. But I wonder how we’ll feel there. Anyway, I hope you’re right as usual, you old thinking machine. Just think, Andy.” He turned to Andy Thorne, the other occupant of the room. “Glamor girls from Hollywood, or its modern counterpart. And we can have our pick of them, too. We’re bound to be glamor boys to them. Back from the starways.”

“That’s the trouble with you young unmarried people,” Lansing admonished. “Marriages have dropped eighty-seven per cent this last year over the previous year. And it’s all because you young people are dreaming of romances when we land.”

“Can you blame us?” Ted persist-

ed. “Bet you wish you were young yourself. Me—I’m going to find a cute Earth girl and see the life there. You’ll probably be closeted with Earth scientists, talking over percentages. Or maybe they’ve advanced so much in science you’ll have to go to school all over again.”

“That’s possible,” Lansing said. “Here on the *Astral Traveler* we haven’t made too many advances in theoretical physics in three thousand years. On the other hand, civilization wasn’t too firmly established when we left... We should be raising Earth on our radio soon.”

Thorne snorted. “Wouldn’t it be funny if after coming all the way back to the Solar System we found that life on Earth was gone?”

“It isn’t gone,” Lansing said. “You’ve seen the Earth through the telescope. It’s substantially the same as the pictures of it. There’s been no catastrophe big enough to wipe out all mankind.”

The intercom loudspeaker clicked audibly. The three men looked up at it, waiting for it to speak. "Dr. Lansing," it said, "will you please come to Control Center at once?"

The gray-haired scientist picked up the hand mike on his desk and acknowledged the call. "Maybe this is contact," he said.

But when he returned an hour later he was frowning. He shook his head in answer to Grant's and Thorne's questioning look. "I think something has happened to the Earth," he said. "We're skirting the Earth's shadow and taking spectros of sunlight that has passed through the Earth's atmosphere. The absorption spectrum shows some disturbing things. We don't know what to make of them yet."

"Like what, for example?" Grant asked.

"A seventy-five percent increase in carbon dioxide and a ten percent decrease in oxygen content. That indicates either a tremendous increase in vegetable matter or a disastrous decrease in animal population, including man, or both."

"What else?" Grant said.

"There's an appreciable dark line indicating carbon fourteen, the unstable isotope. There shouldn't be. That means there's an appreciable part of a percent of that isotope in the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. And that's impossible, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless there's a gigantic selective reactor in operation on the Earth," Lansing said. "It would have to be designed for the purpose, and it would have been in operation for at least a thousand years. It could have been built with the knowledge Earth had when we left in 1982, but it would take an insane group to actually build it."

"WHAT DO you mean?" Thorne asked. "What could it do?"

You mean it would make so much radioactive carbon that life would be destroyed by the hard radiation?"

"No. Not enough for that. No danger of that. What I mean is that each C-14 atom would be a small bomb liable to explode at any time. In the heart of a living molecule, especially the sperm or egg, it could do anything from destroying the fertilized egg to altering it so that the resultant organism would be malformed. Mutated."

"There's enough for that?" Thorne asked.

Lansing nodded grimly. "The most accurate estimate we can make is that one seven-thousandth of the Earth's carbon is C-14!"

"Then there won't be any human life on Earth?" Grant said, disappointed. "But there must still be people on Earth Station. It's out of range in its orbit outside the atmosphere."

Lansing was shaking his head. "We're close enough to see it in detail now. It's riddled. It was close enough to the Earth so that space debris had a penetrating velocity due to the Earth's gravitational attraction. As long as its electronic repulsor setup operated, it was safe, but somewhere along the line something happened. I'm afraid we've come back to something we should stay away from. We should turn right around and go back to Alpha Centauri." He grinned at their expressions. "But, being human, we won't. The Council has decided we'll land and investigate."

"That's more like it!" Grant exclaimed.

"Don't be in a hurry," Lansing smiled tolerantly. "We'll repair Earth Station first and place some of our overcrowded population on it. We'll also probably build a smaller ship for the actual landing. It may be a year before we can stand on the land of

our home planet. And neither of you may be in that landing party."

"If I'm not," Grant said, "so help me I'll—I'll parachute down *AWOL*."

"That's what I mean," Lansing said, frowning. "You're prone to disobedience. You have a record for it. Still, if I have a say in it, I'll see that both of you are in on the landing."

THE LEAVES whispered softly, almost inaudibly, as the dawn breeze came to life. Whispered, and then became silent. In the silence sounded the distant plaintive call.

"Bah-loo..."

The leaves whispered again, an undertone of officious self-importance in the sound. Balu, hearing it, permitted the beginnings of a smile to quirk her lips.

The breeze, as though encouraged by this sign, shifted slightly, washing against dew-studded fruits. Its new approach was rewarded by a quivering of sensitive nostrils and a further widening of the smile.

The leaves rustled expectantly. Balu rose lazily to one elbow, stretched one wing sleepily until it was fully extended, reached an arm along its forward edge until short-fingered talons touched it, their points a scant inch from the elbow where the wing began to sweep backward.

In almost a continuation of the movement she sat up, instincts maintaining her balance on the six-inch-thick branch. Not until then did she open her eyes, and then abruptly, their smoky violet orbs only partly revealed by the elongated tear-drop frames of jet lashes which began at the edge of either temple, curving around to terminate at tear ducts inherited from oriental ancestors.

"Bah-loo..."

She seemed not to have heard the far-off cry of pleading and protest as she sat on the branch, her long grace-

ful legs swinging, her violet eyes taking in the myriad silver flashes from the underside of the leaves as they were stirred by idle air currents.

A wide yawn revealed even white teeth, a firm red tongue. And then with lazy grace she reached upward with her wings and brought them down swiftly, lifting herself up. Taloned toes, long and powerful, like those of a gorilla, seized the rough bark of the limb.

From her impudently pug nose to her overly wide but feminine shoulders, from her softly rounded breasts to her narrow waist and smoothly curving hips, she might have been a girl alone in the privacy of her room. A girl with rich brown hair cropped in a boyish bob, with overly mascaraed eyes. A girl whose firmly molded features were as caucasian as her eyes were not, whose expression mirrored innocence and unselfconscious contentment.

For the barest instant she poised. Then she dived headlong from the branch in free fall, wings trailing, legs doubling up until knees rested together against her breasts.

The wings came to life now, reaching forward to seize the invisible air and toss it backward and downward in skilled thrusts, while the slim arms curved forward and the strangely animal hands seemed ready to protect the face against any unexpected obstacle.

Her head was tilted backward, slitte eyes into the wind, smoldering violet fires lurking in their depths. On her face was still mirrored the expression of contentment and innocent unconcern. Nor did it alter in the slightest as, a third time, the protesting and bloated roar, "Bah-loo!" erupted through the forest.

Before the echoes of that angry wail died she was gone, leaving only the whisper of the leaves.

"God!" Andrew Thorne said with soft reverence into the microphone of his spacesuit.

TED GRANT heard the one-syllable prayer and looked down between his knees through the two miles of space toward the approximate spot where Thorne had dropped. "Find anything yet?" he prompted hopefully.

"No," Thorne's voice came. "I was merely extolling over the beauties of the landscape down here."

"Yeah? I think I'll drop this egg-beater down to where I can do some extolling myself."

"No!" Thorne's voice was sharp. "It might frighten her!"

"Her?"

"Damn," Thorne muttered. "All right, I just saw one of them. But she flew away. I'll have to find her again."

"Flew?" Grant's tone was skeptical. "Angels yet? Good lookers I trust?" When there was no answer from Andrew Thorne, he switched to long distance broadcast. "Grant calling ship," he intoned.

"Go ahead, Grant," the answer came immediately.

"Thorne located one of them. It flew away. From his reactions it was female, young, and beautiful."

"Did you say flew?"

"That's what I said. Flew."

There was a moment of silence. A new voice came on. "What type of machine did it fly away in? This is most amazing. It never occurred to us they still had a machine civilization."

"I gathered that it didn't have a flying machine," Grant said dryly. "Wings. Just wings."

"Even more remarkable," the voice said. "Relay to Thorne that he must get a pair of them at any cost. Spengler was right. These people, left to

themselves, have developed a technology peculiar to themselves. From those wings we may be able to deduce their entire science, from mathematics to plastics. We must get a pair of them at any cost!"

"From Thorne's reaction," Grant said patiently, "I should imagine that if you want a pair of the wings, you'll have to take their owner too. You see," he took a deep breath, "she grew them. At least I think that's what Thorne implied."

"Grew them?" The question exploded through the loudspeaker and was followed by a silence pregnant with surprise. "Impossible! The human features couldn't alter enough to enable them to gather food without the aid of hands. In any mutation that changed the arms to wings, the person would have to be fed continually by hand, or starve to death."

"I wouldn't know," Grant said. "Want me to connect you with Thorne?"

"Yes."

Grant adjusted the necessary switches for a three-way contact and listened...

"Let me get this straight," Dr. Lansing's voice said with the patience a professor exhibits toward a particularly stupid student. "You say the wings are attached to the back? Then they are obviously mechanical."

"No," Thorne said with the dogged stubbornness of a backward student. "When she woke up she stretched them. They aren't mechanical."

"I'm sure you must be mistaken. But keep looking for her. I'm coming over. And Grant, you stay where you are so I can find the place. Is he hovering directly above where you are, Thorne?"

"Approximately. Maybe a quarter of a mile to the south. But I told you she flew away, and I haven't been able to find her."

"She won't have gone far, I'm sure. Wings such as those would have to be refueled often for prolonged flight. No—I know you're convinced they grew. But I assure you that's impossible, even with the C-14 action. You'll see. Keep looking for her. I'm going to leave the ship now."

Grant heard Thorne's deep sigh, and grinned his amusement.

"BAH-LOO..."

Andrew Thorne frowned in speculation over the strange protesting call. It might have been that of some wild creature, except for the sharply accurate enunciation of vowels and consonants.

It was more than possible he decided, that it came from a human throat. Since there was no way of knowing where the girl had flown, he made his way in the direction from which the call had come.

Shortly the terrain changed from the solid mixture of dirt and decayed though dry vegetable matter to a clinking muck that was treacherously slippery as well as clinging. The sparse shrubs and grasses were replaced by a plant that seemed to consist only of fine green threads that lay on the surface of the mud and snarled around his boots when they skidded.

Finally he became unsure of his directions and paused to rest and wait for the call to be repeated. He had a good five-minute wait before it came, and then it seemed to come from a different direction and be farther away than before.

Disappointed, he turned to make his way back to secure ground again.

Without warning he was struck from behind. He fell sprawling and instinctively rolled to his back, fumbling at the catch that would release his hip gun while his eyes searched for the source of danger.

His fingers suddenly froze into mo-

tionlessness. On a limb of a nearby tree the girl was poised ready for flight, her back to him, her head turned so she could watch him, a half-curious, half-afraid smile on her lips.

"Hel-lo!" Thorne breathed, rising in slow movement to a sitting position.

"Hello!" She might have known the meaning of the word or merely repeated the sound. Her voice was clear, well modulated, and entirely feminine. Thorne found himself wanting to hear it again.

"Don't be afraid of me," he said.

"So you *are* a visitor," she mused. "I wasn't sure. I've never seen a visitor." She lifted herself with a movement of her wings, turning to face him, and in a smooth movement seizing the limb with taloned toes and squatting, hugging her knees and resting her chin on them while her smoky violet-slitted eyes regarded him with frank curiosity.

"So you can still speak!" Thorne stood up slowly.

"Of course," she said. "Our sworn duty is to preserve the language." She paused, then added, "And help one another."

"Do you have a name?"

"Balu." She smiled.

"Balu?" Thorne said. "So that was someone calling you!"

"My brother.— Do you have a name?"

"My name's Andrew Thorne. You can call me Andy."

"Andy. I like that. Your shape is strange. Is that why you are here?"

"I'm wearing a space-suit," Thorne explained. "I have to keep it on because of the C-14 in the atmosphere."

"The C-14?" Balu said. Only she pronounced it *Cif-Fortean*, with a quiet reverence.

THORNE was left with his mouth open as the implications of her tone penetrated. He changed the sub-

ject. "Why did you push me over just now?" he asked.

"To have opportunity to see how you behave," Balu said. "I think I like you. I'll come down and let you pet me if you wish to." Without waiting for his reply, she slid off the branch and with two deft swoops of her wings stood erect less than four feet from him, as unconscious of the effect she produced as a little child.

Thorne's spacesuit was suddenly intolerably hot and stifling. He took a step forward, and stopped as his eyes were drawn in hypnotic fascination to hers. She matched his stare, as fascinated by his. They remained that way seconds or minutes. She took a timid step toward him, reached out and touched the chest of his spacesuit with her almost entirely animal paw of a hand.

Awareness of self flooded over her suddenly, changing the delicate pink of her skin to a flushed red.

Once again Thorne was shoved sprawling to the ground, this time on his back. As he fell she turned away, darted a smile at him over her shoulder, and leaped into the air.

He watched numbly as her huge wings scooped upward to carry her out of sight before he had time to call to her. A melodious embarrassed laughter drifted back to him through the trees.

"Balu!" he called. "Come back. Please!" He bit back any further call and got to his feet. "That little devil!" he muttered.

"Sounds more like an angel to me," Ted's voice sounded.

Thorne choked back an angry reply and searched with slowly dwindling hope for some sight of Balu through the trees. Instead there came a now angrily indignant call.

"Bah-loo..."

It was repeated with an almost sobbing undertone. It was louder and

closer than it had been, but seemed to come from no definite direction.

Andrew Thorne felt, abruptly, a great emptiness, a terrific loneliness, an aching yearning, for what he couldn't define. But all that met his searching eyes was the mocking flashes of the silver undersides of the leaves of the trees and the thick twisted branches, and the only sound was the slightly brittle rustle of the leaves as they were moved by the morning breeze.

TED GRANT, using powerful binoculars, had located the bright reflective flash of Thorne's headgear. When Balu fled he was able to follow her flight until she came to a stop a good half mile from Thorne. She was in a small clearing. He watched for a moment and decided she must be picking berries and eating them.

He grinned to himself, shut off his contact with Thorne, and raised Dr. Lansing. "I think it advisable for me to put my gyro on autopilot and go down, sir," he said. "The girl got away from Thorne. I can see where she is. I could reach her in five minutes."

"Keep her in sight and wait until I get there," Lansing's crisp voice ordered.

"I don't think that wise," Ted said. "She's moving about slowly and I'll probably lose her. Better for me to go down."

"All right then," Lansing consented.

"Thank you, sir!" He switched Thorne on again. "Lansing's ordered me down. I was able to follow her flight. She's a couple of miles away from you toward the northwest. You can contact me suit to suit now."

Not waiting for an answer, he shoved in the autopilot, opened the hatch, and dove out.

Now his attention was concentrated on the clearing where he had seen Balu. With the skill of experience he guided his fall in that direction. He planned to land in plain sight of the girl. She had already seen one space-suited figure and therefore would be less afraid. Since Thorne's suit had red trim and his had blue she would know it wasn't the same person.

He loosened the safety flap over his hip gun holster while eager anticipation shone in his eyes. He had no intention of letting Balu get away from him.

At five hundred feet he was directly over her. At fifty feet he released hydrogen into the deep cups of the chute to give them buoyancy. He touched the ground at a speed of three feet a second, so silently that Balu wasn't even aware of his arrival.

Her back was to him. He pulled the snap that released his chute and it rose slowly toward the treetops. He didn't watch it rise. His eyes were taking in the details of the unbelievable figure of Balu, her long slim legs, her narrow waist, the way the long and powerful wings hinged where her shoulder-blades should be, but so naturally and so beautifully that it was impossible to regard them as abnormal.

AS HE studied her he debated what to do. Should he wait until she turned and saw him? She might take to flight without ever doing that, and he couldn't follow her. Nor would he dare shoot her down. The fall might injure or kill her.

He studied her short tousled hair with its careless rich brown waves, her small ears that seemed almost ornaments to hold errant curls in. He came to a sudden decision. "Balu," he said softly.

Her head went up like a wild animal's and became motionless. She

was poised for flight. When he made no further sound she half turned her head. He sucked in his breath at the weird mixture of races blended into her profile. Seeing him, she turned further toward him.

"Why, you're beautiful!" he breathed in surprise.

"You aren't Andy."

"No. I'm Ted. Don't be afraid of me. I won't hurt you. You—you're so beautiful.... Your eyes... I've never seen eyes like yours."

"Some of your words I don't know," Balu said. "Beautiful? Wonderful? Do you mean you think I'm pretty?"

"Yes. Pretty."

"Thank you. You may pet me if you want to." She advanced toward him, her expression coaxing, bright lights in the smoky violet depths of her widely slitted eyes.

"If I want to!" Ted said.

He reached toward her. Abruptly her wings moved, lifting her up and backward. A teasing laugh escaped her lips.

Ted, mistaking her maneuver as an attempt at escape, leaped toward her. His arms encircled her. Surprise held her unresisting as she stared into his eyes.

"I'm going to let you go in a second," he said. "Before I do though I want to make sure you understand that I won't hurt you. Do you understand that?" She nodded. "And you won't fly away?" She hesitated briefly, then shook her head. "All right, you've promised," he said gruffly, releasing her.

She backed away a step, her expression half subdued. Ted found he was panting and his heart was pounding against his ribs.

He reached out and touched her face with his glove-encased hand. Balu smiled shyly but didn't back away.

"I'm going to take off this space-suit," he said.

"Can you?" Balu said in surprise. "Andy told me *Cif-Fortean* wouldn't let him."

"God! I forgot about it!" Ted said. He groaned. Then he grinned. Reaching out and wrapping his fingers around her wrist, he said, "Come on, Balu. Let's go find Andy. Before I forget I'm a gentleman and make a pass at you." He grinned and reached for her wrist.

Playfully, she eluded his grasp and pushed at him, her wings starting to lift her into the air. Then she paused and returned to him. He laughed and imprisoned her in his arms, pressing her tightly against his spacesuit and wishing it weren't there. On impulse, he reached up, turned the transparent helmet half way round and took it off. Holding it in one hand, he pulled her toward him with the other, and kissed her full on the lips. "Well," he teased, "guess not everything on Earth has changed. With a little practice, baby, I could almost go for you, claws and all."

She stood quietly watching, with a dreamy smile, as he put the helmet on again. Her nostrils wrinkled when he opened the manual controls on the air tanks to blow out the C-14 from the suit. When he was satisfied, he turned them back to automatic again and took her hand in his.

Her wings beat and threatened to lift them both into the air. Laughing, he said, "Here, none of that. Stop it."

"Let go of Balu!" It was Thorne's voice, frigid with rage.

Ted turned his head and saw Thorne already leaping toward him. He released Balu and jumped aside, shouting, "Take it easy, Thorne. Take it easy."

Thorne came to a half in his headlong charge. "You—you dirty swine!" he gritted. "You fool! You crazy fool! What do you think you're doing? This is no ordinary girl."

"Damn you!" Ted said, leaping forward. He squared off at Thorne, fists doubled. "Don't you try to tell me how to act!"

Neither noticed Balu rise on silent wings and perch on a nearby tree limb. They were glaring at each other, oblivious of everything else.

"Stop shouting!" Dr. Lansing's voice interrupted. "Look up. I'm only a hundred yards above you."

With a wary glance at each other, they looked upward and saw the space-suited figure of the scientist descending with his tandem chute taut above him.

AN EXPRESSION of disappointment had flashed over Balu's face at the cessation of what had promised to be an exciting fight, to be replaced by interest in the figure now landing. That interest was reflected on Dr. Lansing's face also. He released the catch that sent his parachute drifting away without even seeming to be aware of doing so. His eyes were taking in the details of structure, the wings, the strange eyes of Balu.

Thorne and Ted stood in scowling silence while this inspection went on.

"You aren't afraid of us?" Lansing asked. Balu smiled and shook her head quite vigorously. The scientist added, "What a beautiful mixture of the real and the impossible! Tell me, are there more like you here?"

"I have a brother," Balu said.

"Where is he?"

"Out there." Balu pointed vaguely. "He isn't much like me."

"Are there others?" Lansing asked. "People with wings like yours?"

Balu shrugged indifferently. "Maybe." But there seemed to be something akin to fear lurking in her eyes. Lansing saw it and changed his mind about something he was about to say.

Instead, he turned to Thorne and

Ted with a grin. "If you two were fighting about her," he said, "get over it right now...." His voice drifted off. Balu had glanced upward and let out an involuntary gasp, then darted into the concealment of the branches. He looked up.

At first all he could see was the two helicopters hovering at five thousand feet under autopilot, ready to come down by radio control when they were needed for takeoff.

Then he saw a flash of white. His eyes adjusted to it. It was a flying human, legs drawn up against its chest. He saw another and another, until he could make out at least five. They were at three thousand and climbing.

It was Thorne who divined the intention of the flying men. "The ships!" he said. "They're going up to the ships!"

"They will wreck them," Balu said calmly.

"She may be right," Lansing said. "If they board the ships and switch them off auto they'll crash. We'd better bring them down."

He touched a gloved finger to a stud in the chest of his suit and started uttering sharp explosive repetitions of the word *dot*. Ted did the same.

The two helicopters responded by starting to drop rapidly. The winged men moved to intercept the ships.

There began a strange duel in the sky as the two men on the ground maneuvered the ships this way and that, and the flying men darted this way and that to intercept them.

Suddenly one of the flying men was struck by a lift blade which broke one of his wings and half severed it. The ships and men were less than a thousand feet overhead.

A moment later a faint scream drifted down. Two of the others had dived after him and caught him in his

fall. They continued dropping until they were out of sight. Seconds later, having deposited their wounded companion in safety, they rose in zooming flight to join the other two in their attempts to board the two ships.

"If they succeed we'll be stranded for days," Lansing groaned. "Our suit radios won't reach the spaceship."

And even as he said it, two of the flying men darted in from underneath and found secure holds on the undercarriage of each ship. Both Ted and Dr. Lansing maneuvered their ships, trying to throw the winged men off, but they were dealing with men who were accustomed to violent flight. In a moment it was all over. The flying men had gained access to the interiors of the ships and thrown out the autopilot control.

As the ships ceased to respond to remote control, the three men on the ground stood still, watching as the two flying men darted away to join their two companions and watch the ships veer out of control and plunge downward.

"THIS IS awful!" Dr. Lansing said ineffectively. "Our air cycle might exhaust itself before we're found."

"Let's find the ships," Thorne said. "Maybe we can fix one of them. Or maybe we can work one of the radios and contact the space-ship."

The flying men were no longer visible in the sky. Either they hadn't seen the three space-suited figures on the ground, or they didn't care to investigate them.

Balu cautiously came out of concealment. "I'll help you find your ships," she said.

Lansing looked at her, frowning. "I wish you had some clothes to wear," he mumbled.

"Clothes?" She laughed delightedly.

"I know about clothes. I will get some."

She leaped into the air and darted away.

Lansing watched her go. When she was out of sight he turned abruptly to Thorne and Ted. "I want you two to listen to me," he said sternly. "I'm in command. Nobody issues orders here but me. What I say goes. And I want to warn you—I'll tolerate no messing around with this Balu, either. Maybe her ancestors were human, but she's not. If one of you succeeded in mating with her, your offspring would be monstrosities. More than likely they'd be born with their brains outside their skulls like radiation-blasted white mice have been. I won't stand for either of you playing around with her. She's not a toy to be experimented with. I want her to be left alone. Do you understand? If not, I'm going to see that you get full demotion and penalties when we get back to base ship. We're here for routine inspection. And Ted, you particularly—no Don Juan stuff like you're noted for among our own peoples."

"Are you sure you aren't exceeding your authority?" Ted asked softly. "After all, I'm the senior officer on this jaunt. My orders take precedence over those of a civilian scientist. I shall do exactly as I please."

"We are three," Lansing snapped. "Theodore Grant, you are under operational arrest. In the presence of Andrew Thorne, I invoke Articles of Space, Section 14A, Code BF, Item 7.18. Until we return to the ship you are not to speak except to answer specific orders. The slightest infraction of your arrest will be answered by total paralysis. Is that clear? I will take no chances with you."

"Yellow," Ted sneered as he started his hand toward his gun.

Lansing brought out his hip gun.

"That will do," he said. "Mr. Thorne, disarm the prisoner."

The sneer on Ted's face remained as he elevated his arms and permitted Thorne to take his hip gun.

Thorne turned to hand it to Lansing. "Out of the way!" Lansing shouted, then groaned. Thorne turned quickly and saw Ted dropping his helmet to the ground.

"Might as well take my suit too," Ted said. "I'm staying here." He inhaled deeply. "C-14 contamination won't be so bad when I get used to it."

"Do you like me now?" Balu's gay voice broke into the consciousness of the three men like a shot. They turned and gaped at her.

She had taken three leaves from a tree and fastened them in place with long strands of grass.

LANSING sucked in a breath and turned back to Ted. "Put your helmet back on and evacuate your suit or you get paralysis right now."

The sneer came readily to Ted's lips. "Go ahead. You won't dare keep me under permanent paralysis more than a day or two."

Lansing's lips compressed with determination. He made sure of his aim and pressed the contact stud of his hip gun. Surprise started to mold Ted's features and was arrested half way.

Lansing holstered his hip gun. He caught Ted's limp form before it hit the ground. Easing it down, he got the helmet and put it in place. Then he took the cover off the emergency suit controls and operated them until he was sure all the contaminated air was ejected.

Looking up at Thorne he said, "I don't think he could have gotten enough to do any damage."

"What did you do to him?" Balu asked.

"He was insubordinate," Lansing explained. "He shouldn't have taken his helmet off."

"Why not?" she asked. "Why don't you take yours off? Why don't you, Andy? Ted did, and kissed me. I wish you would." She smiled archly, the flirtatiousness of Cleopatra appearing again through the lost centuries, in this creature with the beautiful face, wings and claw hands.

"You mean he took it off before this time?" Lansing said.

When she nodded, he stood up. "The fool," he said. "The poor benighted fool. This planet does things." He looked pityingly at Thorne. "Don't let it affect you too, son. Life patterns gone crazy, every individual born here the first and last member of a unique species in the constant reshuffle of infected gene structures...."

Thorne averted his eyes. He looked at Balu, tried to turn away, then let himself look directly into her violet, alien and yet somehow not alien eyes staring invitingly from behind their broad almond curtains of lids.

He jerked his eyes away. "We'd better get to the ships, sir," he said gruffly. "I'll carry Mr. Grant."

THE TREE trunks rose twistingly to become many crooked limbs that climbed still higher until they were lost in the silver blanket formed by the undersides of their leaves. Occasionally there was a break that revealed the blue sky and billowy bleached clouds. Sunlight streamed down in broad staircases.

There was no sound other than the heavy breathing of Thorne from the exertion of carrying Ted's lax form, the scuffling of his and Lansing's feet through the tough grass, and the sounds Balu's broad wings made when

she darted overhead, keeping pace with them.

On Thorne's face was an expression of bitterness that reflected his inner and unsuccessful attempt to draw his thoughts away from Balu.

On Dr. Lansing's face a half frown rested, forgotten. His trained eyes automatically took in the details of structure of the plants, the occasional insects, tabulating what they saw.

In his mind's eye he was seeing the theoretical picture of a giant molecule with its chains and rings and branches of connected carbon atoms that depicted a living chromosome. He was seeing the normal chemical actions that took place in that theoretical chromosome and its companions. Normal chemical action that eventually produced a living organism. Tree or animal or human.

And then in his mind's eye he was seeing a different kind of action. In the heart of this giant theoretical molecule, where no external atom or ion could reach, a carbon fourteen atom suddenly became something that wasn't carbon. Subtle shiftings of ionic potentials began, and when they were completed the chromosome was something else.

By analogy he saw the structure of chromosomes in the seed bearing the same relation to the adult organism that a set of basic postulates does to a system of mathematics, or a set of traffic laws does to over-all behavior of traffic. One insignificant change spreading its effects throughout the resultant system, altering it perhaps beyond recognition.

AND INSTEAD of that basic change being brought about in a sensible and intelligent manner, it was wrought by chance. Blind chance that placed an unstable carbon atom any place in the molecule. Blind chance

that dictated when that atom would change, and what would result when it did.

That process had been the major mechanism of evolution from the first beginnings of life. Its workings had given the first and most primitive of virus forms a protective wall that had made it into a single-celled life form. That process had given the cell wall properties of cohesion that made possible the multi-celled organism. That process, working through the one unstable carbon atom in a thousand billion, had enabled blind chance to explore every avenue of possibility in organic chemical structure over an interval of ten thousand centuries until it discovered Man!

But here Lansing noted the differences that made each tree, each leaf, each blade of grass, unique. Here was no one C-14 in a thousand billion atoms of carbon. Instead, by actual test, there was one in every seven thousand. An average of three in the structure of every molecule that possessed the attribute of Life!

Lansing looked around. Here, in the grasses underfoot, the trees, the insects, and in the female form that flitted overhead from tree to tree, pausing to look down at him and Thorne and Grant, was the blind process of evolution carrying on its explorations at a mad pace a billion times faster than Nature intended; so swiftly that it had no time for stabilizing and perpetuating its discoveries!

In swift bold strokes it lifted the human form to that of angels, and plunged it down to the primeval slime. There was no way of knowing what Balu's parents were like, or what her offspring would be like, except that they would almost certainly not be like her.

Lansing's brooding frown etched its way deeper into his features. Here

was the force of Life, taking inanimate atoms and shaping them together into the animate dynamism of living form. And here too was the force, infiltrating carbon fourteen, making of that Life force a plaything.

He sensed it around him, touching against the wall of his spacesuit with hungry fingers from the atmosphere, omnipresent and infinitely patient, ready to permeate and contaminate every cell of his body—if he would but take off his helmet and breathe: for, though the bloodstream primarily absorbs oxygen and gives off carbon dioxide, it also absorbs carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide, so that with each breath millions of carbon ions enter the blood. *And only one C-14 atom in the right place is needed to produce a mutation!*

Something jerked Lansing out of his reverie. He looked around, trying to find what it had been—and saw the supposedly paralyzed Grant's hand cautiously extracting Thorne's gun from its holster.

"LOOK OUT, Thorne!" he shouted, leaping forward.

He saw the gun come up and center on him. He tried to duck aside. Then he felt the tingling sensation of every member of his body going to sleep. As he sprawled forward he caught a fleeting glimpse of the gun being turned down toward Thorne's legs. He found himself staring straight up through the trees at the sky. Aside from the tingling feeling of arms and legs asleep, and even stomach and chest and shoulders, he wasn't uncomfortable.

But how long had he been that way? Searching his mind he was distinctly aware of a gap in time. How long it had been was impossible to tell.

"Damn you, Ted," he heard Thorne

say. "My legs are paralyzed. Put down that gun. You're insane."

"Insane?" Grant mocked. "For the first time in my life I'm not insane." He laughed.

Thorne's voice sounded in a sharp, "Don't!"

A moment later Lansing saw Grant standing above him. He was no longer wearing his spacesuit.

"I just wanted you to see me," Grant said. "Now you'll know there's no use looking for me. By the time you found me I would be too contaminated to be allowed on the ship. Goodbye."

Lansing tried to talk, to tell him to put his suit back on, to explain to him he was sick. That the C-14 had in some way gone to his brain and he was doing things he didn't really want to do. But he was gone, and there were only the still trees and the jagged spots of blue sky.

And there was no sound except for the infrequent petulant wail from far away: "Bah-loo..."

Balu had said it was her brother. Why did he keep calling her? Why did she so calmly ignore his call? Why didn't he come looking for her, or *could* he look for her? From the deepness of his voice he was quite obviously adult. Was he one of those winged men who had scuttled the two helicopters? What had become of the wounded flying man?

These and dozens of other questions formed in Lansing's thoughts without any hope of immediate answer.

He returned again and again to the winged men. It was significant that the only humans he had seen so far all had wings. Was it possible that nature had found an answer to C-14 in some genetic pattern that remained stable, and that all human life here was now of the winged variety? That seemed impossible, but wings growing

from shoulder-blades were impossible, too, and Balu had them....

The tingling feeling began to grow less. According to the books that meant paralysis would soon go away. The sensory system would recover before the motor network. There would be a period of perhaps five minutes during which feeling would be normal but muscular action still difficult. Lansing wished he could at least turn his head and see how Thorne was.

Something vibrated through his spacesuit. It was repeated. It came at regular-spaced intervals and seemed to be a shaking of the ground he lay on. It could be some gigantic creature walking. A distant crashing noise lent support to that theory. The sound died away. The shaking of the ground stopped.

Suddenly Lansing felt his eyes blink. It was painful until tears washed accumulated dust particles away. Involuntarily he moved his head, then froze in surprise and dismay.

Several winged men squatted around in attitudes of patient waiting.

Lansing stared at them. Then his eyes went to Thorne. Strands of the tough grass were wrapped around his wrists and ankles. He was still under paralysis, but when he recovered he would be unable to move.

Experimental tugs at his own legs and arms revealed that he was also tied.

"One of them moves," a winged man said.

LANSING thought swiftly. How much did they know? How dangerous were they? The thongs, the patient waiting until one of them showed signs of movement, pointed to their being friendly but cautious.

Acting on this assumption he looked directly at the speaker and smiled.

"Yes, I'm awake now," he said casually.

"And so am I," he heard Thorne say, matching his tone.

"Fine," the winged man said. "We'll untie your legs so you can walk. Then we must take you to Oldred to see what is to be done."

"Who is Oldred?" Lansing asked as fingers started unraveling the grass strands around his ankles.

"You don't know?" the winged man asked. The others were watching with great interest. "He's our leader. He will want to know about men who shed their skin." He pointed.

Lansing and Thorne sat up and saw what he meant. Ted Grant's helmet and suit lay on the ground where they had been abandoned. Their eyes widened. They looked at each other in secret warning.

"Stand up," the winged man said. "Soon it will get dark."

Lansing noted with surprise as he stood up that the winged men were small. They were only five feet tall, which made them a good five inches smaller than Balu. They all had the close-cropped hair. Their features varied in detail, one face hinting at one race and another at another, but none of them had eyes as strange as Balu's. In fact, he decided, except for the muscular and efficient-looking wings, they were quite ordinary in appearance. One of them even had normal hands and feet.

"Come on," their spokesman ordered. He led the way.

Lansing recalled the aerial view of the country as he had seen it from the helicopter. Fifty miles in the direction they were now travelling was a range of hills. Before that, perhaps less than ten miles away, was a small lake.

"Bah-loo..."

The wailing bawl broke in on Lan-

sing's thoughts. He looked at the winged men. They seemed not to have heard it.

"What was that?" he asked.

"That," one of the winged men said, "was Oldred."

"Then your leader is Balu's brother?" Thorne said in relief.

The winged men all stopped and looked at him. "What do you know of Balu?" one of them asked in a menacing growl.

"We...chanced to meet her," Lansing said quickly. "She told us her name. Then she flew away."

The winged men said no more, but now the pace they set was much faster. The slope of the ground changed to gradual ups and downs and finally became all downhill. They crossed a clearing that gave a view of the lake. Two of the winged men took to the air and went on ahead.

Speaking in German Thorne said, "Should we try to escape?"

Lansing shook his head and answered in the same language. "No. We probably couldn't for long, and I want to see this leader they have. Also, we'll be missed before too long, and so long as they think our space-suits are skin, they won't try to take them off us. When the search party comes within range of our suit radios we can tell them how to find us."

"What were you saying?" a winged man asked suspiciously.

"We were discussing your leader," Lansing said. "He must be a very great man."

"Then you've seen him before!"

"No," Lansing said. "I was merely judging by the appearance of you and your companions."

"Oh?" the winged man said vaguely. "Well, you're right. He is a great man. He grows greater all the time. Within the memory of man he has al-

ways been great. Some day the lake will be too small for him."

He waited until he saw the effect his statement had produced, then turned his eyes away.

"He must be kidding," Thorne said in German.

"I don't know," Lansing said thoughtfully. "It may be possible. Continued growth isn't half as fantastic a possibility as wings. The most fantastic thing about it is..."

"What?" Thorne said.

"If Balu is his sister—"

"That would make her far older than she looks!" Thorne said.

"That's true," Lansing said. "But what I was thinking was, that would make it possible that she is the mother of all these winged men."

THEY STOOD close together on the sandy beach, their eyes searching the undisturbed surface of the lake. A quarter of a mile out was something small and white. It hadn't moved since they arrived.

The winged men seemed to be waiting.

Rapid movement overhead attracted their attention. It was several of the winged people. Two of them were carrying a third between them. One of his wings was half severed. It was the one who had tangled with the helicopter blade.

The group darted out over the lake toward the thing that stuck out of the water. As they neared it, it emerged further from the lake.

Lansing and Thorne stared in stark unbelief. It was the profile of a face. Bloated almost beyond recognition it was still a human face. And from the indeterminate chin to the sloping top of the forehead it was at least a hundred feet.

The group of flyers slowed to

hovering flight above it. Screams drifted across the intervening water to those on shore. Abruptly the wounded flying man was dropping. Still screaming, he was trying desperately to fly with his one good wing.

The gigantic face elongated another ten feet. The flyer vanished within the maw of the enormous mouth. It closed, cutting off his screams. At the same time, the surface of the water was convulsed and a human chest acres in extent broke the surface.

Another group of winged people appeared over the lake. Four of them were teamed together over the body of a large animal. The mouth opened again to receive this additional morsel.

Dazed at the sight, Lansing looked around him—at the peaceful trees, at the white sandy beach, so normal in the framework of concepts he had built up about the Earth. He looked back at the monstrous form in the lake and squeezed his eyes tightly together, shaking his head. When he opened them again mild waves were washing up on the beach.

A winged man grinned at him. "We all get there eventually. I think you two will be next, though. Oldred will be curious about your taste."

"Now?" Thorne asked Lansing tensely, in German.

"No," Lansing said. "I think our guns can paralyze that thing's throat if we get dropped in. I want a chance to observe it and see if it still has intelligence. It must have taken centuries for it to grow that large. Maybe it knows what happened. I want to talk to it."

"Bah-loo..." The call was a deafening roar. But now there was an understandable reason why it had carried ten miles!

"You want to talk to it?" Thorne exclaimed.

A SWIFT figure darted into sight from over the treetops and landed lightly on the sand after seeming certain to be about to crash. It was a child, a girl. "The hairdred is coming!" she shrilled. "The hairdred. This way." She turned and leaped into the air, her wings taking deep bites for quick altitude.

"Hairdred!" It was a murmur of fear.

Lansing felt the ground under him quiver the way it had when he had first regained feeling after the paralysis. The winged men looked fearfully toward the trees. Two of them seized him between them and leaped into the air. Their wings beat frantically as they rose a few feet. With cries of disappointment they dropped him.

He landed sprawling on the hard-packed sand and had a fleeting glimpse of Thorne doing the same. Then everything was blotted from his mind by the sight that confronted him.

The creature was eight or nine feet tall. Its arms were long and its legs were very short and bowed. From its broad shoulders to its pink toes it was covered with a mat of hair.

But it was its face that drew Lansing's eyes with hypnotic horror. A face that was entirely human, on a large scale, and perfectly proportioned—lean cheeked, a firm cleft chin and beautiful nose. By itself and without regard to size it was definitely a pure British type. Except for the eyes. The pupils and irises were black. What should have been the whites were a mottled dullish brown. Large veins formed networks over their surface. In contrast to the face, which seemed molded in lines of gentleness, intelligence and humor, the gleaming jet centers of the eyes seemed to hold the ultimate spirit of hate and evil.

They added the touch that made the face that of a fallen angel, a Sathanus. In keeping with the giant beast form of the body.

Thorne had seen it too. The initial moment of surprise was over for them and for the hairdred. As it raised one of its legs to step forward, both tremendous arms reaching toward them, they fumbled madly with their bound hands at the flaps over their hip guns.

Thorne secured his gun first. He pointed it at the nearest part of the giant anatomy, a leg. The hairdred toppled sideways, an expression of surprise on its face.

One of its hands touched Lansing's legs. Fingers big as jointed forearms wrapped around, squeezing. Lansing screamed at the pain. His gun was out. He pointed it at the arm and saw the huge fingers slacken.

The hairdred uttered the equivalent of a grunt of surprise. It came out as a deep unhuman bellow.

Both men were now playing their paralysis guns over the monster. Even when it lay completely still they continued, until their frenzied fear abated.

Trembling, they stared at the mountainous bulk.

"Horrible!" Lansing said shakily. "Horrible. Horrible. And yet, it's human. I can still feel sorry for it. Except for C-14 and the inroads it has made in these thousands of years, it would be like us. That face. That beautiful godlike face."

"All I hope is that they find us and get us off this planet," Thorne said. "And when they do, I hope they drop a sunmaker bomb and wipe out the whole ungodly mess."

"Oh, no," Lansing said quickly. "I think—" He stopped and looked up as a flurry of wings descended and the flying men were back.

"What did you do?" they asked, and there was caution and respect in their manner.

"WHAT IS it?" Lansing asked, evading the question. "That girl called it a hairdred. You've called that monstrous thing out in the lake Oldred."

"Oh," one of the winged men said, "all the giants are called dreds. None are like our Oldred."

"I can see that," Lansing said impatiently. "What I mean is, is there a race of giants? Are there more like this one?"

"Race?" The winged man looked puzzled. "What's that? There are more of them, of course. Lu is this one's brother." He pointed at one of the other winged men, who grinned and nodded vigorously.

"Your brother?" Lansing said. "But how can that be? You are so different."

"We are molded by our spirit," Lu said seriously. "The flesh takes the form predetermined by the soul."

"Nonsense!" Lansing said sharply. "Your form is determined by the gene pattern in the egg. And it's unstable carbon, C-14, that has botched up the human strain."

"I don't know many of the words you use," Lu said, "but you are right, according to the teachings. *Cif-For-tean* is the Universal Spirit that molds the flesh to fit the spirit. But you and your companion have very strange spirits indeed. None are like you. Oldred will be interested when we can attract his attention."

"When will that be?" Thorne asked.

"Maybe not for days. Right now he's hungry. We hunters have been scouring the country for days, searching for enough food to satisfy his appetite."

"Why don't you let him die?"

Lansing said. "He's too big. It would be an act of mercy to—"

"But we were created to serve him!" Lu said. "You just don't know what you say. You must be from a far place."

"And him?" Lansing said, pointing to the hairdred.

Lu shrugged. "If he lives, then many lifetimes from now he will crawl into the lake beside Oldred when his legs will no longer support him. Maybe he will kill Oldred. Then bur children's children will feed him."

"Oldred once walked on land?" Lansing asked.

Lu nodded. "It's so. Far before the memory of anyone but Balu, our grandmother."

"What is the far place you are from?" one of the other winged men asked impatiently.

"Too far for you ever to have heard of it," Lansing said. "There are many of us, but we came here in flying machines. You know about that, of course. You made our flying machines fall to the ground."

LU WAS shaking his head knowingly. "We do know about it. You must be from the home of the *Cif-For-tean*. Within the memory of Oldred some of our ancestors found it after many days of flight. Only two lived to return. The others were—" He stopped, his eyes widening, and turned to the hairdred. "Made helpless so they couldn't move!"

"What happened to them then?" Lansing said.

"They were taken behind a wall of solid water that surrounded a huge place and covered over the top of it. Though the two waited for many days they never came out."

"So Oldred has said," the original spokesman for the winged men said.

"You are two of the guardians of the *Cif-Fortean* then? You must be." When Lansing hesitated, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head. "I am Paul," he said. "I wish to thank you for giving me the form of a winged man. I have tried to be worthy of it."

The others had dropped to their knees and were saying much the same thing. None of them noticed the change that had come over the hairdred. He had recovered and was lying still, waiting for his chance. Now, suddenly, his gigantic hands shot out. Both Lansing and Thorne found themselves dangling head down with one leg imprisoned in a giant fist.

"And I wish to curse you before I kill you," the deep voice of the giant said, "for giving me the form of a beast so that I am an outcast."

"Stop!" Lansing said, fumbling for his hip gun. "Don't you know there is purpose in everything? We made you as you are because we had a purpose for doing so!"

The hairdred, about to dash them both to the ground, paused. As Lansing had hoped, he was curious, and so long as curiosity remained he would not destroy the ones who could satisfy that curiosity.

"Put us down!" Lansing ordered.

Slowly, reluctantly, the giant gorilla monster with the face of a man obeyed.

Lansing saw that this had increased the respect of the winged men. A plan, an idea, was born in his mind. He gave Thorne a warning look. Then, looking up into the face of the hairdred, he said with great solemnity, "From now on you belong to me and will serve me. And you, Lu and Paul, and your companions, will also serve me."

He paused, searching in his thoughts for something else to say that might

help. It wasn't necessary. The winged men were again on their knees. And the hairdred, his brilliant coals of eyes flashing with a new fire, had also dropped to his knees. "We are yours," he boomed, a world of pride going into the *we*. Tears welled from his weirdly soft eyes. Tears that washed away some of the infinite loneliness of a lifetime of ostracism from the companions of his childhood.

IT WASN'T until later that Lansing and Thorne could talk. The sun had gone down. The moon cast an eerie glow through the trees that made things visible in an unreal way. Thorne had watched the winged men fly to high branches and relax in what seemed suicidal positions, and had recalled his first glimpse of Balu as she slept that morning.

Fred the hairdred was stretched out on his side not far away, callous of danger, his broad shoulders making his relaxed width as much as an average man's height.

Lansing seemed eager to discuss something. Thorne had questions he wanted to ask. Both men talked in German in low voices.

"How did you know the beast would let us down?" Thorne asked.

"Remember when you were under paralysis?" Lansing said. "You were able to hear everything clearly. I knew he had heard us talking and had digested a lot of what we said. Even so, it was just a gamble I was taking while I tried to get my gun out of its holster. And the others, I saw it would be utterly useless to try to teach them the truth about themselves now. Better to use their beliefs to our own advantage and use them to help us get to the root of what's happened here on our home planet."

"But we know what's happened,"

Thorne said. "The unstable carbon has caused it all."

"Yes. But unless some artificial source kept manufacturing it, it would drop to a minimum before long. Remember what they said about a domed city? My guess is that somewhere here on Earth a group still lives that knows science. I would say that they have atomic piles that are set up to make C-14 and disperse it in the atmosphere."

"But why?" Thorne said. "What would be their object?"

"There's no way of learning that until we find them. Some of the microfilm records of books I've read mention something about groups that believed the only way man could be peaceful was to practically wipe him out, and keep him that way. It could be that some sect of that type gained control of an atom plant during a war and carried their plan into successful operation, and their descendants have carried on the plan. If so, we've got to find that dome city and put a stop to it. In a few hundred years, or even less, the C-14 would drop to a safe level. The various breeds of man would slowly straighten out and breed true. History could start over again. Especially with us of the *Astral Traveler* to guide things and later establish colonies of our own kind here, with birth-control restrictions off so that we could multiply."

"What about people like our friend Fred?" Thorne said.

"It would all straighten itself out. I hope." Lansing smiled. "Fred, the poor devil. Things like that hundred-foot-long monster in the lake couldn't last. I wonder if he'll live forever if fed? I've been trying to figure out his age from his size. He must be over a thousand years old. Maybe about fifteen hundred."

"And his sister," Thorne said. "How could she live as long if she doesn't keep growing?"

"Some other glandular balance. We won't bother about those things. Time enough for study after we find and root out the fiendish thing that's causing this tragedy to humanity. Now, let's get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be a busy day."

"I wonder how Ted is making out," Thorne said after a long silence.

Lansing sighed. "There used to be micro-organisms that made their way into the body and multiplied rapidly under the ideal environment they found there. One of mankind's greatest battles was against that type of enemy. I venture to say Ted's corpuscles are very busy. It'll be interesting to dissect his body when we find it. Still, maybe he will survive. I've been puzzling about what came over him to behave the way he did."

"I know what came over him," Thorne said dully. "Something that's lain dormant for three thousand years while we traveled through space. Something stronger than—anything."

After a long time Thorne went to sleep, with Balu's eyes vivid in his mind. Eyes that held the secret of life and promised to reveal it to those who had courage.

Lansing remained awake a few moments longer, covertly watching Thorne and understanding far better than Thorne could have guessed. Just as he was dozing off, a thunderous bellow from the lake shattered the night.

"Bah-loo..."

Oldred, too, was lonely.

BOTH THORNE and Lansing slept fitfully. The night seemed full of sounds, and it was the first night outside the confines of a ship for each of them. There was the sound of the

trees swaying in the breeze, the small sounds of night creatures. Once one of the winged men fell off his branch and uttered an involuntary cry of alarm as his instincts made his wings catch hold and keep him off the ground. And Fred the hairdred snored, though it was more like the soft sound of regularly spaced blowoffs from an air tank with a safety valve.

Once, just before dawn, a faint whisper came over the suit radio. "Dr. Lansing," it said. But it was very faint and wasn't repeated.

At dawn Oldred once again took up his petulant calling for Balu. With the first stentorian bellow the winged men awakened. Lansing marveled at the delicate balance they maintained while they stretched their wings.

Fred opened his large round eyes without otherwise moving a muscle. The iridescent black pupils contracted to small dots in the center of soft brown hemispheres as he regarded Lansing thoughtfully.

Lansing returned the stare, waiting. He found it hard to believe that these strange mutations on the human race could be held by superstitious awe. Surely, he thought, a night's sleep will have made clear to them that their variation from the norm is due to the quite understandable action of an element with known properties, and that no supernatural agency was involved.

But one by one the winged men dropped to the ground and bent low in an attitude of reverence, first to him and then to Thorne. When the hairdred finally heaved himself to his feet with a grunt and did reverence as humbly as had the others, Lansing breathed a sigh of relief. It still seemed too improbable to accept, but there it was.

It was Lu who asked the inevitable

question. "Should we bring you food, Dr. Lansing?"

The vision of actually eating ounces of radio-active carbon in food made him shudder. He shook his head, and saw the awe in Lu's eyes increase. He turned and looked at Thorne with a half smile. When no one was looking both men surreptitiously pressed the stud on their belts that popped food tablets into their mouths, and a second stud that raised a tube to their mouths so they could draw in water. The suits were designed to be lived in for periods at a time. It would be another ten days at least before the problem of exhaustion of food, air and water would have to be met.

"No," he said. "As soon as you and your companions have eaten, I want you to find out if Oldred will talk to us. I want to ask him some questions."

IT WAS AN hour later that he and Thorne, watching from the shore, saw Lu pause above the monster and make motions that brought the head further out of the water. Water cascaded from an ear for a full minute in a foot-thick stream. Then Lu dove down on spread wings to land on the ear. Fifteen minutes went by. Then a bellowed "Yes," came from the giant lips. Like a slowed-down tape recorder Oldred said, "Bring them out where I can see them. I'll answer questions."

Ready-made ropes of grass fiber were brought to make harnesses for Lansing and Thorne. They were each carried by four of the winged men to spots four or five hundred feet directly over the mountainous face.

They steeled their stomachs against the awful sight. The toothless mouth was a yawning cavern in a mountain of flesh that bore a strong resemblance to a human face overlaid with

layers of fat. The whitish tongue alone weighed tons.

"Your questions," Oldred said, and the breath of his speech made the carriers waver in their hovering flight.

"How old are you?" Lansing asked.

Winged men farther down relayed the question to Lu who shouted it into Oldred's ear.

Miraculously, a smile quirked across the mountainous face. "Lord, I don't know," came the answer. "A thousand or two thousand years, I guess."

"Do you remember when humanity began to change?"

"In my memory it has always changed, but in my youth while I still walked the land I was told tales of a new spirit that had taken charge of the world many centuries before, molding man's flesh to fit his spirit. I was told that I had a very great spirit, and it must be so."

"When you still walked the land, were there others that appeared like us?"

"I have seen them. But none for many centuries."

"When you still walked on the land, was Balu in existence?"

"She is my sister," Oldred said. "My twin sister. She is like our mother, with her wings, and somewhat like our father with her eyes. When our mother died I was already almost too big to walk on the land, and our mother made her swear she would protect me until I died. That is why she cannot die until I do. And something within me says I will never die so long as *Cif-Fortean* rules the world."

"Where is *Cif-Fortean*?" Lansing asked, aping Oldred's pronunciation of the term.

"It is everywhere, within us and within all living things. It is a spirit

in the air itself. But its throne is within the dome of solid water far to the north of here, protected by— But why do you ask? Aren't you of the Guardians?"

Lansing started to say no. He realized abruptly that that would be the worst thing he could do. Oldred believed he would die if the pile that produced C-14 were destroyed.

"Yes," he lied. "But we were lost, and must find our way back. We must be taken to the dome of solid water."

"It shall be done." Oldred spoke with an air of finality, and promptly dropped back into the water, nearly engulfing Lu.

Lansing's and Thorne's ears were still reverberating from the deafening roar of Oldred's voice when they were set down on the shore again.

THE FLYING men left Lansing and Thorne on the beach with Fred the hairdred. Only one of them returned. Lu.

"I've been chosen to accompany you to the north," he said.

"Only you?" Lansing said.

"Only one of us can be spared. There aren't enough of us to keep Oldred in food."

Lansing stared at Lu. The man wasn't telling the truth. And he seemed most unhappy about going.

"Where are the others?" he said. "We ought to talk this over."

Lu shook his head. "It has been decided," he said with finality.

"I'll be enough to protect you," Fred said. "Lu can be our guide, flying above the trees to see what's ahead."

"All right," Lansing said.

Thorne spoke in German. "I think they believe whoever goes with us won't come back."

"That must be it," Lansing said in

German. Then in English, "We want to see our flying machines that you wrecked. Then we'll start north."

They started the way they had come the day before. Fred led the way, his enormous shoulders swaying with his walk, seeming entirely animal from in back with his matted head of hair blending with his body fur. Lu spent most of his time in the air, dropping down for a chat occasionally.

It was afternoon before they reached the two helicopters. One had burned, leaving only a charred skeleton of metal. The other had crashed a mile away. Although it hadn't caught fire, it was strewn over a wide area. Neither could possibly be repaired. The radios of both would never work again.

"We'll just have to keep going until a searching party happens to pass close enough for our suit radio to reach them," Lansing said.

For the rest of the day they traveled. The tough grass polished the boots of their space-suits. It also made walking an effort. Fred had a trick of letting his feet bend back so they weren't snagged by the grass, a trick the normal foot couldn't imitate.

Night came. Lu stretched out on a limb. Fred lay on his side, his broad back against a tree trunk. Both were asleep almost instantly.

AND THEN, suddenly, it was morning. Aching muscles slowly warmed up, but the grass seemed a little thicker underfoot and a little tougher. New varieties of trees took the place of the silver-leaved ones.

In the afternoon a river presented a problem. Lu was away for half an hour searching for a place they could cross, and when he found one it took most of the remainder of the day to reach it and cross.

Just before dark Fred stopped suddenly and motioned them to be silent. His black eyes were alight with excitement. Noiselessly he stole ahead until he was out of sight.

A few minutes later a loud frightened bellow exploded in the silence. It was followed by thrashing sounds. Frantic bawling noises sounded. Then for a while there was nothing but silence.

The hairdred returned dragging the body of a huge nonhuman creature behind him. "Food," he said.

For the next few minutes he was busy tearing off the skin. When that was done he tore out huge chunks of meat and offered them to Lansing and Thorne. When they shook their heads, unable to hide the disgust on their faces, he grinned broadly and sat on his haunches while he gulped down large chunks of the steaming raw meat.

Lu had returned unnoticed. He perched on a limb and watched Fred, and when the hairdred had finished eating all he could hold and had stretched out to sleep, he dropped down and ate his fill.

During the night other animals came. Each time Fred awakened and snarled. And each time the animals slunk away, their gleaming eyes glaring hate.

In the morning Lu was gone.

"HE'S PROBABLY just scouting around," Lansing said cheerfully.

"No," Fred said, his huge features mirroring the tragedy of a twice-broken heart. "I can see now he intended to leave us from the start. He was to lead us far enough away so that we couldn't find our way back, and then leave us."

"But why?" Lansing said.

The hairedred shrugged without answering.

"We'd better go back," Thorne said. "We have no idea where to go from here. No use going on."

"Maybe you're right," Lansing said. "A search party from the ship will find us easier near the wreck of our helicopters anyway."

But an hour later they realized how impossible was their plan to return. They were lost. Too late they saw how completely dependent on Lu's guidance they had been. They couldn't even find the river they had crossed.

Fred, in spite of his beast shape, was peculiarly lacking in a sense of direction. Or perhaps he was deliberately playing dumb because he didn't want to go back. Lansing thought of that, but didn't want to antagonize the brute by saying so.

When night came again they might have been miles or merely a hundred yards from their starting point of the morning.

Clouds had been gathering during the afternoon. When the sun went down it began to rain. For a while Thorne threw off his depressed mood as he and Lansing marveled at the peculiar phenomenon.

Fred sat on his haunches and listened as they theorized on how the raindrops were formed. He seemed to be trying to follow their lines of thought. When they held out a hand to watch the drops spatter on it he did the same, his enormous face lined with concentration.

The talking grew sporadic, finally ceasing altogether. Lansing realized suddenly that he, and Thorne and Fred, were each lonely. For himself, he was lonesome for the comforts and the ordered surroundings of the spaceship. The rain thumping against his suit and the plastiglass of his helmet had a mechanical rhythm that re-

minded him too vividly of the rhythms in the ship.

Thorne—it was impossible to guess what he was lonely for. There was something about this Earth that had a strange effect on the emotions. He had felt it several times.

The sound of the rain, for example, as it fell on the leaves of the trees and on his suit. It made a distinct and strange impression on him. He recalled now that moonlight had had a strange effect on him too.

He had read in some book about something related to that. It came to him after a moment. An ancient pseudoscience called Astrology. It had been just a brief article. Its basic tenet had been that the stars and the planets and the moon had emotional effects on the human mind that could be charted. It was analogous to the known effects of endocrine cycles on the emotional makeup. The article had suggested that any basis Astrology might have in fact was probably directly attributable to the endocrine rhythms.

But now that he was actually here on the Earth, Lansing wasn't so sure. "There are subtle forces here that work on the mind," he decided sleepily.

He opened his eyes to a scene of glistening splendor. Things around him seemed brighter and cleaner. There was a new feeling in his body. It came to him with surprise what it was. He had become accustomed to the long hard work of walking all day. For the first time since he had set foot on the Earth he felt thoroughly rested and fresh.

He got to his feet and looked down at Thorne, still asleep a few feet away. Suddenly his eyes contracted. The hip holster at Thorne's side was empty. Its gun was gone. He reached to make sure his own was still in

place. His hand encountered an empty holster.

There was a deep animal grunt behind him. He whirled. The hairedred, Fred, had awakened and was getting to his feet.

"My gun," Lansing said harshly. "Did you take it while I was asleep?"

"Gun?" Fred said. "What's that? No, I didn't take anything. Is something gone?"

Lansing studied him with narrow eyes. Either the human monster was a superb actor, or something else had stolen in and taken the two guns. Had it been Lu? Or had something else taken them?

He searched through the trees with his eyes. There was no sign of movement.

"**W**HAT'S THE matter?" Thorne asked sleepily.

Lansing spoke in German. "Something stole our guns while we were asleep. I don't think it was our companion. It may have been the one who was with us. Or it may be something new. But we must be careful that our companion doesn't learn we are helpless without them."

Thorne nodded. "Right," he said. "But I disagree with you about our companion. I think he did it. He's shrewd behind that air of dumb innocence."

The gleaming black eyes were looking at them with a patient puzzling light as though trying to decipher the strange words. They lit up at a sudden thought. "I wonder," Fred said. "Maybe Lu left us yesterday because we were near where he was taking you. Maybe he thought you could go the rest of the way without him."

Lansing shook his head. "I doubt if we've gone fifty miles from the lake. It may be only twenty miles. If

it were near here we could have seen it when we were up in our flying machines."

"I saw those," Fred said.

Lansing turned to Thorne. "There's something in back of all this," he said in German. "I'm beginning to think we've been lied to and deceived all along. In fact, I'm sure of it. Maybe there isn't even any domed city. That might have been an invention to get us started on this journey to get rid of us."

"Why would they do that?" Thorne asked.

"Remember our status before we used our guns on this companion we have here?"

"We were prisoners."

"And suddenly we were revered personages, the most irresistible form of flattery. And suddenly again we were completely deserted and lost."

"In retrospect it does sound that way," Thorne said. "Do you realize that in a few more days, unless we're found, we'll have to abandon our spacesuits?"

"That doesn't concern me as much as the reasons why we've been treated as we have. How would they know we couldn't find our way back? For that matter, is it conceivable that our companion, born and brought up not far from here, would become lost? There's only one really sensible thing that could account for what's happened. If they wanted to talk with the monster in the lake without our overbearing they would have to make sure we were twenty or thirty miles away, out of hearing!"

"*You are quite correct.*"

THE NEW voice, speaking German, sounded over their suit radios. At the same time the hairedred's head turned, his huge black eyes looking through the trees.

Lansing and Thorne followed the direction of his gaze. They saw a slight movement. It resolved itself into a figure approaching on the ground. A figure in a spacesuit.

Or was it a robot?

It had two legs and two arms, incredibly long in proportion to body length, and encased in glistening cream-colored plastic. It had a spherical headgear that reflected light in flashes from its outer surface like plastiglass. But it wasn't transparent. Its inner surface was silvered.

"One-way glass," Lansing said, disappointed.

There was a soft laugh. "Sorry," the visitor said in German. "It's standard equipment."

He was taller than either Lansing or Thorne. His legs were four feet long, his body two feet long, with his head adding another foot to his height. Strapped to his back was a helicopter lift.

Two guns nestled in holsters at his hips. They were smaller than those Lansing and Thorne had had, but of a similar design.

"Now then," he said in German, his voice abruptly impersonal, "answer a few questions. And tell the truth. We thought we knew of every dome in the whole world. Evidently we don't. Where are you from?"

"We're from a spaceship," Lansing said. "*The Astral Traveler*. My name is Dr. Lansing. This is Andrew Thorne."

"There was such a ship," the stranger mused, "built three thousand years ago, that left the Earth. It was never heard from again. Don't tell me.... You do have the ancient norm in shape. It's just possible."

"This is something. By the way, my name's John Baker. We'd better get you to the dome so you can get

out of your suits and have a good bath."

OTHER SHAPES identical with John Baker were approaching through the trees now. Baker's body turned toward the hairdred Fred.

"You will go back to your reservation at once," Baker's voice ordered in English.

The giant's eyes turned to Lansing, glistening with unshed tears. His firm British lips, reincarnated into flesh from an era thirty centuries in the Earth's past by the eternal shuffle of the deck of Life, opened twice without uttering a sound. Then, "Goodbye, Dr. Lansing." It was choked and muffled. He turned away and started through the trees, his massive frame swaying from side to side as he walked on his squat legs. Dr. Lansing's eyes were moist as he whispered, "Goodbye, Fred."

"It's only a short distance from here to the tube entrance," Baker said.

Surrounded by the long-legged men, Lansing and Thorne were led through the trees. They had gone little more than a mile when they came to a stop. A few seconds later a rectangular section of the ground lifted straight up.

An elevator emerged slowly from the ground. They all stepped on the platform. The elevator sank slowly. When the earth roof had closed, it was dark for a while. There was a sensation of dropping as the elevator speeded down.

Abruptly it was slowing to a stop and light was everywhere, revealing a concrete tunnel and something Lansing and Thorne had seen in pictures, a long car that ran on parallel steel rails.

Baker reached up and gave his mirrored headgear a half turn and lifted it off. His grinning face was thin but entirely human.

"You can get out of your suit now," he said. "We're free of contamination down here."

"No Carbon-14?" Lansing asked.

"Even less than the normal atmosphere of thirty centuries ago," Baker said. "Every atom of carbon within the aquarium, as we call it, was derived from petroleum that had been in the ground for millions of years. We lean over backwards here inside."

The others were taking off their silvered domes and plastic suits. And all of them were so much alike in shape and features that they might have been identical n-tuplets.

"Go ahead," Baker said.

Thorne took off his helmet and breathed deeply. "Wonderful!" he said.

Hesitantly, Lansing did the same.

The car started and was quickly travelling at top speed, the walls of the tunnel blurred as they shot past. At regular intervals the tunnel widened to a momentary glimpse of a loading platform.

"Other exits," Baker explained. "We have subways radiating out in all directions from the dome. The dome itself is something we're quite proud of. It was built by laying it over the surface of a large hill a little at a time, transplanting the vegetation to the outer surface as it was laid. Vertical shafts were bored and filled with reinforcing rods and then concrete. When the whole dome was completed the hill was mined out from underneath. Not even daily survey flights of enemy planes could have detected its construction. That was done perhaps less than a century after your ancestors on the *Astral Traveler* left, but we're still proud of it."

"That's something we want to find out about," Lansing said. "The

picture I have so far is not one I can sympathize with. As I understand it, there is an atom pile in operation that keeps the air, and consequently all life outside the dome, contaminated with radio-active carbon. That could only be so if it were done deliberately."

"You're tired, Dr. Lansing," Baker said.

"And upset," Lansing said. "But I still want to know if that's right."

"Let's put it this way for now," Baker smiled. "Not so much deliberately as from necessity. You're a scientist. Suppose we let it drop at that until you have had time to rest and get at all the facts. Your strain of humanity has been away from the Earth for three thousand years and is completely out of touch with us and our problems. Don't you think it unfair to form snap judgements based on values that are now, at best, unknown?"

"All right," Lansing grumbled. "I agree I'll be in a better mood to observe after a good rest and some decent food. Pill energy isn't satisfying. But I'm warning you ahead of time that neither I nor any of us from the *Astral Traveler* will show any sympathy toward a plan of deliberate contamination of everything outside a protected dome."

"THIS IS more like home, isn't it?" Lansing said to Thorne after Baker had left them. But before Thorne could answer, a knock at the door jerked both men around.

"Come in," Lansing said.

They watched as the knob twisted and the door opened slowly. Thorne saw who it was first and gasped.

It was Balu, clad in a protective suit with thin transparent plastic over her wings.

"Hello," she said hesitantly, smiling.

ing. "I wanted to meet you, and tell you that I brought your companion back to you. I didn't understand. I'm sorry."

"You brought Grant back?" Lansing said. "Where is he?"

"In the dome hospital. He's being decontaminated. You see, I thought he must be from another dome. An enemy one. I had no way of knowing anything else, did I? Everything pointed to it. The pile-powered airship hovering in the air...."

"You—you're wearing a suit," Thorne said.

"Of course," Balu said. "When I'm in the dome I must wear it to keep from contaminating the dome atmosphere. Would you like to see Ted? He's quite ill." She smiled ruefully. "I guess we have a few bugs his system isn't equipped to handle."

"Lead the way," Lansing said.

"He looks terrible," Balu explained as they walked down the corridor. "He picked up some ancient disease called spotted fever that the human race has been immune to for ages. But he'll be rid of it in a matter of hours, and they're decontaminating him. Flushing him out thoroughly. Very little C-14 will have lodged in him, and the doctors say it won't affect his offspring. But the dose he had was enough to make him crazy enough to lose himself like this. But he'll be all right now."

"Afterward," she said, "I'm to take you to the banquet they are making ready for you."

IT WAS a large room, perhaps thirty by fifty feet, with a fifteen-foot ceiling and paneled walls that several artists had spent their lives decorating. A large horseshoe table went around the room. A smaller table was at its apex. Every seat was filled except those at the head of the

smaller table, where three empty chairs stood.

Balu led the way there and sat on the backless stool between two hand-carved seats that had obviously been reserved for Lansing and Thorne.

They sat down. Their eyes roamed the hall while their minds tried to accept what they saw. It defied acceptance. There were two hundred people. They were quite obviously cultured, civilized, and intelligent. They were dressed in attire that had an approach to uniformity of style.

Balu stood up and raised a hand for silence.

"Ladies and gentlemen of the Council," she said. "I wish to introduce Dr. Lansing and Andrew Thorne, of the spaceship *Astral Traveler* which has just returned to the planet of its birth after a journey of three thousand years."

Lansing looked at the long line of faces. In the whole room there was no distinguishing feature that could be called animal, other than Balu's taloned paws of hands. But the wildest flight of fancy could not have conceived of the variety of shapes represented there.

"Dr. Lansing and Mr. Thorne," Balu went on, "are representative of their race, our parent race, just as each of you is a male or female of each one of our stabilized forms." She flashed a warning smile to Lansing. "Right now, our guests are hungry. I'd suggest we all eat. Afterward we can get acquainted with the star travelers."

Neither Lansing nor Thorne noticed the food he ate, except to note that the potatoes had a better flavor than those grown in the tanks on the *Astral Traveler*. The other vegetables were also of good flavor, but strange. The meat was laboratory beef very

much like that he had eaten all his life.

WHEN THE plates had been taken away, a man sitting across the table from them who had seemed quite short stood up. His legs were pipestems five feet long. His features were crowded in under a bulbous forehead from under which gazed quite normal blue eyes. When he spoke his voice was a baritone, clipped and efficient.

"I have been made acquainted with your reactions to us here on Earth so far," he said. "As President of the Council, I have been delegated to give you a quick picture of what's happened since your branch of the race left the planet.

"Briefly, there were several global wars. Atomic weapons were a terrible thing. The human race was not ready for them and perhaps would never be ready for them. About two centuries after your ship left, the final bid for world supremacy was made by one of the race-conscious nations. It chose the best of its population and built protected domes for them to live in. It then put into operation a plan no other power group had dared try. Universal contamination. It chose radioactive carbon as being the easiest contaminant to produce in great quantities, and the one that, in the form of carbon dioxide, would spread all over the world. Experiment had already shown that a rather small concentration of it would be disastrous. Experiments on small animals had shown that almost invariably in two or three generations the offspring were so deformed they were born dead or were unable to successfully grow to adulthood.

"Further, C-14 would die out more rapidly than any other of the workable radioactives, so that when the

clean-up campaign was over the world could be restored to habitability and repopulated with this one race of people.

"For over twenty years they built up their supply of radioactive carbon, while they were constructing their domed cities along the same lines as this one we live in. Then, without fanfare, they released it. Of course it was immediately detected. That was to be expected. It wasn't in lethal quantities. It was presumed it would be quickly absorbed by the world's forests. There was no alarm. In fact, no one knew exactly what country had released it.

"It was considered impossible for enough to be produced to do any real damage. Too late it was found out that this was a false conclusion. Too late other countries built domed sanctuaries. And then what this country had expected happened. In the battle to live in those sanctuaries against C-14, they became citadels under constant attack, changing hands often, with their inhabitants massacred. That happened to some extent even in the country that masterminded the scheme, but the planners had hidden the nucleus of their planned humanity well, and it remained for the most part undiscovered and safe.

"In five hundred years the human race was reduced to total savagery, and its numbers reduced to the point where whole bands of savages could live out their lives without meeting another group. Mortality was high, and continually growing. It is estimated that only one out of five thousand born alive was capable of living for more than a few minutes.

"But Nature had an answer ready-made for this attack. By the very nature of things, the evolution produced by C-14 explored every possibility and every path of possibility, upward

and downward on the ladder of change.

"Genius persisted too. Here and there a mastermind perceived the Whole. Wrecked dome cities were repaired. Petroleum was the source of stable Carbon. And in this environment of stable Carbon new varieties that had come into existence were developed into permanent human strains. You see many of them here. There are others in the interconnected domed cities of the American continents.

"With the growth of our new order of humanity grew a realization of the errors of the past. With it also grew a perception of the destiny that the last of the aggressors had embarked the race upon: the searching out of all the races potential to mankind.

"We could not turn back the pages of time. We could either arrest the progression of evolution by permitting the C-14 to die out naturally after we sought out and destroyed the criminal race, or we could carry on until it became certain no new mutation could be produced.

"By vote we chose to continue the experiment. Under our charter of world government at the turn of every century, we vote again. So far that vote has been for continuation. Do you have any questions?"

"**D**ID YOU ever find the hidden cities of those who started all this?" Lansing asked.

"A thousand years ago the last was found and all its inhabitants destroyed."

"Then there are no more like us on the Earth?"

"No. The parent strain was unstable to begin with and didn't survive. I am of the opinion, though, that the world will welcome you of the *Astral Traveler* back into the family of races

and make a place for you as you are. Am I right?"

There was thunderous applause.

Lansing stood up slowly, his face expressionless. "You must realize," he said, "that I am not actually a spokesman for all of us. In fact, Mr. Thorne here, and I, and our companion now in your hospital, are merely scouts sent down to find out what's happened on the Earth. Therefore, I think the proper course would be for us to return to the ship we landed in and inform our superiors of what we have found. They in turn can make what decisions they think best."

The spokesman stood up again, smiling. "I agree with you," he said. "But we would like to know what you think personally. We realize of course that it must be a shock to you. Human values have changed. It was inevitable."

"Yes," Lansing said. "They've changed. But..." He paused and looked over his audience. Suddenly he smiled. "I'm sure you won't have anything to worry about."

There was more applause. A buzz of conversation rose in the room. Lansing caught snatches of it and found none of it to be in English. He had wondered about English being used after so long a time. Now he guessed that it was probably a dead language preserved or revived because all the scientific knowledge of three thousand years ago was in that language.

The spokesman stood up again. "Just as you cannot speak with authority for all your people, so I cannot at this time. But just as you hold out hopes of friendly reunion, so I feel strongly that I can promise full incorporation of the inhabitants of the *Astral Traveler* into the society of Earth's humanity with full citizenship."

IT WAS three days later. The ship had been contacted by radio and was waiting. Grant, though still weak, was well enough to travel. His space-suit had been found and brought to the dome city. And now an atom-powered helicopter from the city's own fleet, loaded with dozens of reels of film and other carefully chosen samples of Earth civilization, was ready.

Lansing shook hands with one after another of the varied humans, a smile carefully fixed on his lips, his eyes unexpressive. And each was warm in his invitation for him personally to return.

At the end of the line was Balu. Lansing took her thick paw clumsily.

"I wish to talk with you a moment before you leave," she said.

"All right."

They moved away from the others.

"You are a little like me," Balu said abruptly. "It may be because you have lived a long time yourself."

"I'm sure you overrate me," Lansing said, smiling.

"No. I don't think so." Her violet eyes were serious. So close to her, seeing her eternally youthful face, he found it difficult to believe her centuries old. "I don't think so," she said. "You have no doubt noticed that they carefully avoided mention of the fact that I am one race of man that hasn't succeeded in breeding true. The immortal who doesn't achieve immortality by continued growth. Maybe it's because there has never been a male of my species. But it does make me an alien among them. Just as you are."

"Nonsense," Lansing said cheerfully. "I've watched them. In a way, you're their queen. In the city and outside. All of them."

"Their pet," Balu smiled. "Take me with you, Dr. Lansing."

"Take you with me!" He blinked at her in surprise. "Why, my dear, I—I'll—"

"You won't be back," Balu whispered. "I know it. I see it in your eyes. Take me with you. I'll undergo surgery to remove my wings. I'll have these animal hands amputated and wear artificial ones. I'll wear dark glasses to hide my eyes."

"But I will be back," he insisted.

She shook her head. "You will tell them of Oldred and the hairedred. They will see things in those movies you are taking along. I know what will happen. Even if the others don't. And..." She rested a paw on his chest. "I have lived a long time. I have given myself to children to further their game of exploration of the paths of evolution of mankind. They are all children. Babies in a mixed-up cosmos where they try to convince themselves that everything is all right so they won't be afraid. But now I am tired. I want to rest. Take me with you..."

She faced him straight. As he looked into her eyes and realized what she was trying to tell him, he felt like crying. "My dear," he said softly. "It would never work out. We belong to two different times. And it would be wrong to try to put them together. Believe me—it's better this way."

She stood motionless.

"Goodbye, Balu," he said gently. "Goodbye, my dear. And thank you."

When he stepped into the helicopter he turned and looked over the heads of the farewell committee. Balu was still standing where he had left her.

He lifted his hand and waved.

For a moment she didn't move. Then her arm came up. She waved hesitantly, and smiled tremulously.

With his eyes still on her, he closed the door.