

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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thundering death

by . . . Lee Priestley

Did she talk about evil, he screamed at her. She was a creature of the deep darkness and an evil spirit too!

CONANT watched the mountains draw nearer. The sun, low in the western sky behind him, made magic with refraction angles and aerial dusts to bathe the peaks in a rosy glow like a displaced sunrise.

Under him now reared the columnar rocks that had looked like organ pipes to some imaginative geographer thousands of years before. This valley between the river and the mountains had supported a large population based on agriculture and the atomic production base nearby. Had supported it until the stockpile blew up in a catastrophe that had made this whole region forever uninhabitable. . . .

Conant glanced at the ground view screen. He had an impression of motion, lost as he had looked. What had moved down on the mesa, bare save for mesquite and sparse tufts of grass? Perhaps some small underground life had escaped the blasts and the after contamination. The experts had agreed that no man could have survived or escaped through the radioactive rubble. He frowned at the screen and dropped to a lower altitude to see better. He had just missed seeing something—

The world of the mutant, discussed from time to time in SF, will inevitably affect the social mores of the feverishly "normal" coexistent society of the day. Kansas-born Lee Priestley, wife of a New Mexico newspaper publisher and author of some fifty novelettes and short stories, makes a challenging contribution to the literature on that possible World of Tomorrow.

The light was failing now. The deadly fires began to glow in the twilight with eerie glimmerings. After a thousand years this was still dangerous terrain. It was strictly forbidden to fly over it even.

By an association of ideas Conant felt in the breast pocket of his tunic to finger the cysteine anti-radiation tablets he carried there. The big pills, compounded of amino acids protected against lethal radiation for short periods of time. He had six of them. More than that could cause organic damage and if he were in hot terrain for longer than six-pill-protection. . . . Conant shrugged and absently popped one of the tablets into his mouth.

He had turned aside from the regular trans-terran routes in a long repressed curiosity. He wanted to see the area where his illustrious ancestor had helped explode the first atom bomb and later died in the elemental fires he had helped to kindle.

The gravest damage resulting from the catastrophe had been the removal of this large area from food production. Now that population increase made food supply more critical from year to year the loss of even a few acres was deplorable. Here had been a fertile river-empire, not too unlike the far older valley civilizations of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates that had cradled the human race. Here, too, had lived ancient races in the dawn of history.

A desire to see this ethnic cradle was one of the reasons Conant had turned aside into forbidden territory.

He would be punished—any deviation brought punishment in a highly regulated world—but he didn't care.

Mounting the ethnographic hobby that fascinated him, Conant thought about the Spanish who had first settled this region and displaced the aborigines. They wrote of a *querencia*, the region where an animal (including man) was reared and with which he felt a mystic kinship. It was this instinctive tie that drew the dog, the cat, the horse (now extinct animals) back across incredible distances to home. A man could have a spiritual *querencia*, Conant thought; could feel an in-born sympathy with a time and a place. The grim forbidding mesas and mountains above the valley had drawn him all his life.

Here had lived the Apaches supremely adjusted to their ungenerous environment and becoming incredible savage cavalry. Conant had come across two bits of information in his reading of time-worn old manuscripts that posed an interesting question. After one of the many wars preceding the Atomic Age, Kalmuks who were the last remnant of the Golden Horde, those Asiatic horsemen who had swept across half the world like death in a whirlwind, had been resettled on these arid mesas so like their own homeland on the high steppes. What might have happened had the two civilizations with a remote common origin and a culture based on the horse (now extinct, of course) had time to merge and interbreed? Pos-

sibly a better world than the one Conant knew where the things of the spirit were choked by wealth and debt and servitude and cynicism—

The ship dropped out from under Conant, then, clutched in the pull of a down draft. As he fought the controls he saw movement in the view screen again. Incredulously, he recognized the animals streaming across the mesa below him. Galloping, manes and tails afloat on the speed of their passage; up-flung heads drinking the wind; slender legs spurning the dust . . . horses! Horses, supposed to be extinct these many centuries!

The thunder of their passing merged with the crash of the ship and the trumpeting of a stallion became the keening of telescoping metal. . . .

Conant kept his eyes closed with a childish certainty that knowledge of his predicament would be more painful than his present ignorance. Only, what he didn't know *was* hurting him. The small effort of keeping his eyelids down against the stimulus of bright light exploded red flashes of pain inside his head.

Cautiously, he slit one eye, then the other. He looked down over his own chest. He hurt all over as if he had been beaten, but no members were missing. Turning his head he found that he lay on a painfully thorny bed of flattened mesquite, tangled in the cordage of his ejector-chute. When he rolled to

escape the puncturing thorns, he found out about his leg. Broken midway between knee and ankle—mercifully not a compound fracture.

He lifted his shoulders to look around him. Gray-tan mesa sparsely studded with green-brown vegetation; a blinding flash of reflection from polished metal gave him the position of the wreckage three hundred yards away.

He must crawl there, dragging his leg. He had to rig some kind of splint if he didn't mean to lie here and die. It took a long time to hack out a chunk of fabric from the chute, then to crawl across it. Bound roughly into the nylon by some of the cords his leg would have all the protection he could give it. It wouldn't be easy.

Conant set his teeth and began crawling along the gouges the ship had plowed into the gray-white soil. The mesquite and the creosote bushes grappled with him; the cactus snagged his garments and his flesh; his eyes and mouth filled with stinging alkali dust. He resisted the mounting pain in his leg with all the determination he could exert.

Don't think about it . . . don't think how much it hurts . . . Don't think! Don't . . . think. . . Damn you, if you have to keep thinking, at least change the subject!

This gray-white powdery soil that choked him had decomposed from limestones . . . limestones meant caverns, underground water systems, and few surface streams. Funny . . . the Apaches, pressed to the

limit in their search for food in this barren land, would eat nothing that came from water . . . not even mountain trout. The Indians had been good swimmers, too. . . .

Conant lay with his face against an outcrop of stone until the minor pain nagged him to renewed effort. He progressed another foot. *Think about something!* he told himself savagely, tearing his tunic out of the grip of a mesquite. *That leg feels exactly like it's on fire. . . . Time to change the subject. . . .*

The Kalmuks, those Mongol remnants of the Golden Horde, and surely of the same ethnic stock of the Apaches, reversed that taboo. They ate gratefully anything they could obtain from water but they never bathed all over for fear of turning into fish. . . .

There wasn't much left of the ship, but it hadn't burned. The automatic switch-off had worked. *That leg is a flaming misery. And no switch-off. . . .* He had to salvage what he could. Water, food, a covering against the sharp cold of the high altitude. And something to splint his leg. He squirmed among the jagged twisted scraps.

Before exhaustion stopped him he found a plastic bottle of fruit juice, a bitten-into-and-rejected sandwich showing through the transparency of the flattened memo-plastic lunch box, the torn jacket that still hung over the back of his smashed seat before the controls. With what he had in his pockets . . . ray gun—gone, probably snagged by one of

the mesquite branches, watch and wrist radio (smashed), a lighter, the cysteine tablets, and miraculously intact in the same pocket, a midget scintillometer ticking rapidly as it measured radiation by flecks of light. He watched the glowing dial for a moment, then clicked off the current. No use exhausting the batteries to show him what he already knew. This terrain was lethal.

He rested a few minutes and then set about the splinting of his leg. It was noon before he uncovered a tool and mid-afternoon before he had hacked out a hairpin shape strong enough to sustain his weight. If he could hobble—if he could get the leg secured in the hairpin—if there was any better place to hobble to. Resting, he scanned the scintillometer, calculating how far apart to space the cysteine tablets.

The cordage he had brought from the chute was not enough to bind the leg securely. He eyed the nylon square, but without it the night would be a cold misery. Mud for a make shift cast? The powdery soil here would swallow water endlessly, if he had any. But *adobe*, a certain red-brown soil of the region, had been used for molding bricks that had outlasted centuries. If he could locate some of that—

Conant looked across to the spurs that walled the mesa. He might find *adobe* at their bases, if he could get that far. He *had* to get there, for the tumbled limestone strata of the mountains possibly channeled water down there. He must find water

soon and with luck the *adobe* would be nearby. He splinted his leg to the knee and began crawling again.

Mercifully, he was numb with pain as he wormed across the sun-baked mesa. *Keep squirming, Conant, you fool. A sensible man would lie down and die in peace. Only you're not sensible. You wouldn't be here if you were.*

It hadn't been sensible to disobey the regulation against coming here, to keep resisting the pressure of the intolerable and interminable net of laws and rules. It wasn't sensible to hunger for human relationships, for a way of life that had long since joined the dinosaurs. The decision to fly over this region had been suicidal, the blind escape of a wounded animal. . . .

Yesterday he had hurried to tell Alaine about his promotion. It would mean they could establish a home together, make their love a matter of public record. He hated the job that made him only a superior variety of Peeping Tom, but a complex civilization had to stamp out its heretics and he could endure it for Alaine. Conant took the steps up to her living cubicle three at a time.

Working the knocker, he waited impatiently. At last, the click of Alaine's sandals drew nearer and she opened the door. Golden-eyed, her curled hair the smokey purple fashionable that season, ripe body revealed by the supple silver mesh of the robe she clutched around her,

Alaine set Conant's pulses racing as she always did.

"Oh, it's you." Her voice was flat and there was no welcome either in her wide golden eyes or on her perfect face. She looked fleetingly over her shoulder, then stepped out into the hallway, pulling the door closed behind her.

"You might as well know now, Con," she said rapidly and softly. "I don't want you coming here any more."

Conant's arms dropped and astonishment washed the eagerness out of his face. Not want him—As if a door had opened on a too-full closet, a host of incidents ignored in the past cascaded off the shelves of his memory. The times she had laughed at him, calling him "old-fangled" . . . her impatience with his unfashionable moral code . . . her avid reach for money and position . . . the occasions when her response to his passion had been less than warm. . . . Firmly, Conant closed the mental door against any more.

He caught her into his arms, laughing down at her. "Don't tease me like that, darling. For a moment I thought you really meant it!"

She put his arms away and stepped back, her hand on the door. "I do mean it. We simply aren't suited and a girl has to think about her future. You're always talking about getting married and having children. Heavens, *nobody* does that any more! You're so behind the times you'll never be anything but a

clerk. You'd have a fit if I saw other . . . friends—" She glanced over her shoulder.

"Who's in there?"

Before she could make a denial Conant stood her away from the door and pushed it open. The man sprawling in a state of gaudy undress on the couch was Marteen, Conant's bureau chief . . . who did not know as yet that Conant's promotion would reverse their positions. Marteen looked up sleepily and tipped him a gesture of greeting, derisive and triumphant.

Conant closed the door again. "Alaine of the main chance," he said to the girl. "Only you've sidetracked yourself, darling. Suppose I told you that I'm to be bureau chief as of tomorrow . . . that Fancy Pants in there on your couch is on his way *down* the ladder I'm climbing. Would that make any difference?"

Alaine's eyes narrowed. "Con, you can't mean— Oh, Con! *Darling!* How marvelous!" She made overtures with her lashes, letting him see the invitation in her half-veiled glance. She leaned forward to whisper, a sensuous and calculated whisper. "I'll get rid of Marty. You and I have so much to . . . talk about!"

Conant parted her arms with force enough to send her staggering back against the closed door, the robe parting over long white thighs. But she was back at once, throwing her arms around his neck, laughing gayly.

"Silly. Couldn't you tell I was

teasing? A girl likes to see if she can *really* raise a couch-mate's blood pressure!"

Conant put an arm under her knees and kicked the door open. He carried her inside and stood a moment looking down at the lovely face resting confidently against his heart.

"Use your wiles on the new couch-mate, dearie. Your couch is getting too crowded for my taste," he said.

Then he had dropped her beside Marteen. . . .

Conant erased the hateful picture of Alaine's furious face from his mind. She probably was no worse than the rest of the women in the city . . . certainly not worth dying for. Still, why strive so painfully for a few more days or hours of a life that had turned to dust and ashes?

Crawl another inch . . . gasp another lungful of the searing air . . . crawl . . . crawl. *Give it up, Conant. Is life so sweet that you'll torture yourself for a few more hours of it?*

But the instinct of self preservation isn't controlled by thought. While his brain railed at the stupidity of his toiling body something blindly indomitable in every cell drove him on.

Once he dropped his head toward the scanty shade of a mesquite. From the inch-wide shadow a dry rustling whisper spoke of death. Conant's eyes found the s-shaped snake only inches from his nose. Again his body acted of **its own**

volition to hurl him away from the danger. *You can quit worrying*, he told the indomitable cells. *There's no sense in it, but I won't quit.*

When the blaze of pain from his jolted leg had died down Conant realized that the sharply rising hillside before him was pocked with caves. One might protect a seep of water; be floored with lime sulphide marl.

He had hauled himself to the mouth of the nearest cave when he heard the drumming thunder. Twisting to see behind him, he stared in a transfixed astonishment.

A band of horses . . . a band of the fleet, spirited animals supposedly extinct for centuries. A great stallion raced and trumpeted, driving his harem of mares before him. Conant rolled recklessly to see better the sight that no living man had beheld.

The mares were small of size, fleetly graceful, and golden dun in color. Conant groped through his mind for a word. Such golden horses had been called "palomino". The impression that some of the mares had riders was swept from his attention by sight of the stallion. Dark and splendid, he flashed past, driving his harem into the safety of a narrow shadowed canyon.

When his band had drummed out of sight, the stallion wheeled and galloped back. Conant gasped anew. This was no common horse! Again his mind gave him a word, this time out of ancient legend. Centaur! Half man and half horse! Man to

the loins; then the man's body merged into the splendid strength and beauty of a stallion.

Closer now, the man's face beneath the tossing mane twisted into a savage malignance. Blazing eyes and rearing hoofs threatened Conant. He realized that the stallion meant to kill him.

With the centaur's piercing scream in his ears, Conant dived for safety. Kicking and scrambling, his fingers digging into the sand, he threw himself at the darkness of the cave mouth. He was half inside at the direction of thudding heart and bursting lungs before his brain caught up with him.

Even when the hoofs smashed down on his broken leg there was a moment before the tide of pain swept him toward unconsciousness . . . a moment when the blind determination to keep living catalysed his ebbing strength and sent him scrambling deeper into the safety of the cave.

He heard a new sound at the cave's mouth. A catlike snarling rising to an eerie scream above the thud of flailing hoofs and the trumpeting of the centaur. Conant caught a glimpse of a tawny creature bounding after the galloping stallion. A cat? Long thought extinct like the horse?

Through roaring red waves of pain that engulfed him now, Conant's brain had the last word. *Look, maybe you did see a centaur. But if you're seeing sabre-toothed tigers, I give up!*

Then the red waves darkened . . . crested into smashing seas that pounded him under. . . .

Conant lay quietly, puzzled by the bumping, sliding motion under him. The last thing he remembered was being swept under waves of pain after the stallion had trampled him. Now, he seemed to be riding the crests of the waves.

He wondered if he dared try to move. Better not. There had been the snapping stick sounds when the stallion struck his leg. It was probably shattered now beyond any repair.

He opened his eyes, then slitted them against the intolerable blue brightness. How had he got out of the cave? He rolled his eyes enough to see that he was progressing jerkily across the mesa at a height that gave him a face-brushing closeness to the bleached grasses. Obviously the centaur didn't have him, Conant thought, or he would be higher above the ground. Maybe he was being carried in the big cat's mouth!

Cautiously, he raised himself a few inches and saw that his transportation was not so exotic as centaur or cat. He was being pulled laboriously by a very small cream colored pony. He lay back, turning his head to watch without much curiosity a long black tail swishing back and forth across small rounded hips, faintly golden and fuzzed like the cheeks of a sun ripened peach. The silky tail half hid slim legs that darkened from the knees down and tap-

ered to small black feet— Feet? Not hoofs . . . feet!

Conant reared on the travois contrived from roughly trimmed mesquite branches to stare incredulously. This was not simply a pony any more than the centaur was simply a stallion.

Tugging between the pair of branches that served as shafts was a . . . well, call her a pony-girl. She was small and rounded, clothed in a short tunic that did not hide the soft cream colored coat that was more a bloom on the skin than a fur. Down her back ran a shadowy stripe ending in the silky black tail. He could see only the back of her head, pointed elfin ears, and a cloud of dark mane tossed by the breeze.

Conant exhaled the breath he had been holding. The delicate ears flicked hearing the sound and the pony-girl turned to look back. Conant did not know what he had expected, but he saw real beauty. Her face was finely modeled with a faint length and gauntness that underscored beautiful bones. She lifted round arms that darkened below the elbow and pushed aside a silky forelock with small black hands. She looked at him with great brown velvet eyes, soft with sympathy and concern.

A coyote dun, Conant told himself. A bit addled with all the surprises of the past hours he went on to quote from some forgotten manuscript. "*The dun and the dorsal stripe are always waiting to come*

back in horses, for all colors with the exception of gray and roan are recessive to dun."

"Are you in great pain, sir?" The pony-girl spoke in a soft clear voice using *lingua mercatura*, the world-wide language of trade and commerce. "It is not far now. There will be help for you." She looked fearfully across the mesa whence they had come. "If El Leon made Ladino run far away—" Then with a shy smile she touched her breast with a small black hand. "Me, I am Mestina." Then she returned to the shafts.

Not far to where? Or what? Was Ladino that living legend, the centaur? And *what* was this Mestina? Conant seethed with questions. He dug through the scraps and tags of archaic languages picked up from his hobby. Ladino . . . Mestina . . . the words were probably Spanish. He dredged deeper for meanings. Had "ladino" meant "hard to catch," therefore a kind of lone wolf? The word "mestina" first meant "lost sheep" and then later had come to designate a wild or mustang mare.

The bumping grew worse as Mestina crossed a canyon floor beside a deep cleft in the rocks. Toiling up a shale talus slope to approach a cave, the pain in Conant's shattered leg worsened, too. He grew giddy with sensory images becoming a senseless, fragmented pattern juggled in the kaleidoscope of misery.

Some of the fragments seemed un-

usable even in the chaotic patterns of nightmare. Such was the sight of the great tawny cat padding now ahead of the pony-girl, now scouting beside the faint track they followed, now fawning and purring at her heels. It might be a mountain lion. Conceivably, the big cats might still live in these lonely wastes. A fierce predator acting like a pet pussy? Conant shook his puzzled head.

The girl-pony called out as she drew him into the entrance of a cave. "Jeff? Jeff, it was a man! Not quite dead!"

With a light headed acceptance, Conant watched a crude light cart roll into the flickering firelight. A man lay, stomach down, on the low contraptions, his head and chest lifted by a kind of padded bolster. He propelled himself by pushing against the sandy floor with doubled fists housed in leather.

The quick thrusts by the ropey arms and some movement in the neck, half-hidden behind a thick red beard seemed the only activity of which the grotesquely twisted, wasted body was capable. All the vitality of the man concentrated in his face. So lean that the bones visibly stretched the leathery skin, a sardonic humor pointed all the lines up to the flirt of white hair crested like a cockatoo. Bright blue eyes looked Conant over.

"Let's hope our personalities don't clash, *amigo*," the man said. "We're likely to be thrown together some." The blue eyes had been assessing the damage the crash and

the centaur had worked on Conant. "Kinda roughed up."

Conant nodded, not trusting himself if he unlocked his jaw.

"We'll do what we can, but don't look for much." The man's mobile face warned more than the words. "We've got no medicines except some herbs to chew and *tulapai* to get drunk on. I'm willing but I've got only the experience of patching myself when I crashed here twenty years ago." He looked wryly over his shoulder at his wasted trunk and legs. "And I didn't do much of a job on myself."

He wheeled the cart around. Whistling soundlessly, he leaned across the bolster that supported his chest and gently examined Conant's leg. Mestina came then, bringing a flat pottery saucer. She lifted Conant's head so he could swallow the green tasting fermented fluid it contained. He gagged over the stuff and the old man looked up from sorting a handful of yucca fibers to grin faintly.

"*Tulapai* ain't exactly champagne but fill it with pounded *pyote* it numbs a man a little."

After a few moments Conant felt his tongue buzzing and growing thick. The nasty tasting fluid was taking effect. He would need numbness when this fiery bearded old crock tried to set the shattered leg.

Mestina came again and Conant saw with surprise that she had the metal loop he had planned to use for a splint. She had brought it from the cave where he had

encountered the centaur. The pony-girl listened to some muttered instructions from the old man. Then kneeling with a pottery jar she began kneading water into a spot on the cavern floor.

After a time she brought a mass of stiff mud close to the old man's hand. She went to stand behind Conant. The *tulapai* had set his head whirling, but he was aware of the pungent, smoke-sweet scent of her body. Was it one of the desert sages? Indians had perfumed their favorite ponies by chewing the leaves of aromatic plants and then blowing and spitting the bits into manes and tails.

He noticed that the old man watched the pony-girl intently. She stood close behind Conant, one soft hand resting on his shoulder. Then an eyelid dropped over one of the old man's bright blue eyes. A signal of some kind, Conant thought.

But he stopped thinking when Mestina dealt him the blow that would keep him mercifully unconscious of some of the pain to come. . . .

Conant looked around the cave with interest. He had been here for a long time, he was sure, but this was the first moment he felt really awake. That half remembered diving into and struggling out of consciousness—

He dived into his memory. Pain, continual pain . . . *don't bother to recall that . . .* small strong hands (there was something endearing in

their darkness) that ministered to him: the clean sage scent of Mestina's golden body bending over to offer the rough saucer of water; the refuge of her arms when he had been lost in the terrifying half world of delirium; the reassurance of the old man's patience in the interminable hours. . . .

Fully awake, Conant examined the cave. A frugal fire burned in a small pit away from the entrance shielded now with a brush wind screen. Around the walls were ranged bundles and filled bags. One tawny bulk seemed to stretch and move but Conant decided for the moment that the flickering flames caused the effect.

Ready to hand hung hunting bows of wood strengthened with layers of sinew and quivers of arrows more than three feet in length delicately feathered with turkey plumes and pointed with stone or bone. In a corner stood a horseman's lance more than fifteen feet long with a fire-hardened barb. Beside it lay a shield of toughened hide stretched over a wooden frame and several leather and thong slings. The tools of a hunter who must be Mestina.

To think of hunting was to think of food. Conant found that he was ravenously hungry. As if he had rung an invisible bell Mestina came from some inner part of the cave carrying a steaming earthen platter, which she offered to Conant. His nose told him it was a stew containing lumps of some unknown meat, reinforced with thin sheets of

bread made from pounded and soaked seeds.

"How did you know I was hungry?" Conant asked her, around a large bite.

"I saw that it was so." Mestina hunted for a clearer explanation seeing the puzzled look on his face. "I saw it inside my head."

The old man came rolling on his cart then. "She's a mutant, of course and so she had the extrasensory perception they commonly have. She always knows what I'm thinking if I make the thought urgent."

"I was urgently hungry all right." Conant paused with the slab of bread he had been using for a spoon half way to his mouth. "I'm only a little less curious than hungry."

The man laughed, flinging up his head until the white crest flared. "I should think you'd be bursting. We're—shall we say unusual?—Mestina and I. I'm Jeff Fords. All the Fords have been desert men, miners and prospectors, way back yonder even Indian scouts and traders. I used to prospect for uranium-thorium deposits. I wanted to see this forbidden country and curiosity killed my cat same as it did yours. I found out the down draft could pull a small ship right out of the sky. I crashed near here. In spades."

"No one was with you? There was no one to help you as you've helped me?"

"You can answer that by lookin' at me. But don't fret, bud. I patched

you up a sight better than I did myself. And you wasn't busted into so many pieces to start with."

"I don't see how you survived."

"I don't dwell much on the memory," Fords said grimly. "It was purely Hell." His bright eyes crinkled again in their raying laughter lines. "Still, a man likes to blow about his exploits and you could call it considerable of one that I lived at all. I was a dead man that wouldn't die. I ate the grass and the brush within reach down to the last inch of grubbing-up root. I couldn't move, busted like I was, but I did. I pulled myself a few inches by my arms and went to work on the new circle of fodder."

"What about water?"

"See these?" Innumerable puckering seams had made Fords' lips and mouth one continuous cicatrix. "I chewed the cactus . . . never mind the spines. They worked out eventually. I've got no notion of how long it took to work my way here where there's a seep in the back of the cave. I grew a little stronger then and I caught a lizard or two, a few bugs now and then. It got harder when I found Mestina and had to keep her alive. I chewed what awful food I could catch and put it into her little mouth. If I hadn't trapped some horses in the box canyon down there, she would have died. I'd put myself on wheels by then and I killed a horse with a rock. But don't ask me how I managed to milk a spooky mare. I couldn't have done that either, but I did. It was sur-

prisin' how soon she got so she could help. She's quite a hunter now with El Leon to help."

Conant looked again at the tawny bundle near the fire that had seemed to move. His eyes focussed better now to recognize the sleeping bulk of the great cat-animal.

"Mestina found the mountain lion when he was only a handful of cub and they grew up together," Fords was saying.

"You found Mestina? Where did she come from?"

"The Indians had exposed her to die. That's their practice, you know, when a child is born with any physical difference or deformity. I heard the little thing wailin' all one night before I could get to her. Lucky there wasn't any lions about and that Ladino wasn't old enough then to be interested in females. He gets all the exposed girl babies now and his *mujer*-mares raise them. Mestina is a mutant, of course. Practically everybody around is one now—some not so sightly as she is. Her type is getting more common all the time. I think it's going to settle down into a new species."

Conant's attention had grounded on one of Fords' statements. "Indians? There are men still living in these hills? All life wasn't wiped out by the stock pile blasts?"

"What do you think? Maybe they were saved by the caves, I dunno. But there's quite a few Indians, descendants of the Apaches and the Kalmuks that settled near the reservation." Fords grinned. "Yessir, if

all life was wiped out, these mesas and mountains are haunted by some mighty lively ghosts!"

Conant stared down at his leg. It was neatly bound into the metal loop, then plastered over with stone-hard adobe. Fords had made a neat job of it.

He reached for the jug Mestina had set beside his couch and took the last cysteine pill with a swallow of the greenish, sour-tasting liquor. He shuddered over the stuff but remembered to be grateful for the oblivion it had given him when he needed it most. He had stretched a six day supply of pills over more than twelve weeks. He checked the scintillometer. Only a scattering of light flecks here while at the scene of the crash and the first cave the dial had glowed like the rising moon. Radiation was far less here . . . the radiation that hung over the region like a cloud of death.

That was a good simile, Conant thought. A cloud didn't cover all the sky; apparently the radioactive danger didn't cover all the area. There must be valleys and canyons that were relatively uncontaminated. The hidden valleys where the Indians lived, for example. There was a safe way through the hot terrain, too. Mestina was proof of that. And Fords believed that Ladino, the centaur, knew the way. How else was he able to cross the mesa to carry off the exposed infants or to steal women for his harem?

Conant picked up the canes

Mestina had made for him and walked about the cave, picking his way with caution. Every day now he could do more. Soon he would be able to pull his oar in this strange boat, so precariously kept afloat by an old man and a . . . girl. Girl? What was Mestina?

She was beautiful . . . so had Alaine been physically beautiful. Honest? Mestina was intrinsically honest; Alaine and most of the women in Conant's world had no knowledge of the term.

Conant made himself face the final question. Human? An animal could be beautiful and kind and certainly honesty was more fundamental in animals than in man . . . but was Mestina human?

Conant sat down again and dropped his head into his hands. Ancient literature held instances of love between man and horse. Even more, ancient film strips abounded with examples. It was a comrade love.

His feeling for Mestina was more than that.

He had not heard her come in until he felt the soft sleekness of Mestina's shoulder as she leaned to set down a water jar. The fragrant cloud of her mane swung to touch his face. Almost against his will his arms reached out to draw her close. He bent to kiss her lips warm and responsive under his own.

But he had pushed her aside and dropped back to his couch before he heard the squeak of Jeff Fords' cart.

"Maybe I'd better ask about your

intentions, mister," Fords said dryly. "Me bein' all the family she has."

Conant kept his gaze on his tight gripped hands. When the silence grew overlong he looked up to face the angry contempt he expected to see in Jeff Fords' sapphire eyes.

There was instead a wry sympathy. "Make up your mind, Conant. What is she? A maiden or a mare?"

Conant felt a surge of anger. How could he speak so callously? The anger went nearly as soon as it had come, swallowed in a vast bewilderment. He got up to pace beside the fire, his hobbling gait repeated by his shadow, giant and agitated on the wall. Then as he turned the clumsy cast tripped him. He would have fallen had Mestina not caught and steadied him in the slim dark arms that were so amazingly strong.

With her cloudy aromatic hair under his chin and her golden ripeness pressed close to his body, Conant stopped thinking. Thinking was a pale and flaccid thing beside the flood of feeling that overwhelmed him. He held Mestina hungrily and over her head answered Jeff Fords.

"I don't care which she is! Or what!" he said furiously. "I love her as she is!"

If he had looked again Conant would have seen an expression of satisfaction on the old man's ravaged face as he wheeled the cart deep into the cave. But Conant didn't look. . . .

Next morning Fords was full of

plans. Before Conant was more than half awake, as soon as Mestina had gone out with a seed gathering basket, he had wheeled the cart beside Conant's couch. Talking earnestly he began to chip away the mud of the cast.

"You've got to take Mestina away now."

"Away? Have you got a recipe for sprouting wings?"

Conant's eyes went to the scintillometer. He didn't need to turn it on to see the flecks of light that measured radiation.

Jeff Fords saw the glance. "That's exactly what I mean. This place is better than where you were, but it isn't good enough. I'm pretty sure that Mestina and many of the other mutants have some immunity but you don't have that protection. Maybe the pills have saved you so far. But you've got to get out . . . and take Mestina with you."

"What will you do?"

Fords lifted his white eyebrows in the facial gesture that amounted to a shrug. He looked at Conant with laughter in his brilliant eyes. "I've had it. . . . I won't crowd my luck. Not when you've dropped in from heaven like an answer to a prayer!"

He nudged the little cart closer. "Listen, you should know all I can tell you about Mestina. First, there are other—shall we say more commonplace?—women in the Indian stronghold someplace back there in the mountains. And I think you can get there so you don't have to choose either Mestina or a life of

celibacy. She's a mutant, of course, and I believe, a hybrid. It's against all knowledge for dissimilar animals to breed, but things have been different for a thousand years in here. Ever since the stock pile exploded mutations and genetic changes became the rule instead of the exception."

"Kitty, kitty!" Fords called, looking over Conant's shoulder and snapping his fingers.

From the fireside El Leon rose and stretched himself fore and aft. Then he came obediently and purring to place his broad wedge-shaped head under Fords' hand.

"Look at this," the old man said. "No more claws than I have."

He lifted a great paw, turning the leg until the pads could be seen. He spread the members on his own hand. Blunt short claws instead of sharp retractable hooks; wide caloused "fingers," five to the hand.

"Ladino wouldn't instinctively fear El Leon if he knew Mother Nature, with an assist from radiation, had literally clipped his claws!" the old man said.

He sat for a moment scratching the big cat's ears. "There's supposed to be a kernel of truth in legend, isn't there?" he asked then. "The Mescalero Apaches used to say that all the wild horses hereabouts were descendants of Diablo, a black stallion that their ancestors raided from Sonora. This devil horse was half man and half stallion like Ladino. Diablo ate flesh and demanded the best looking maidens as a sacrifice.

His get were mare-maidens—like Mestina. This I know for sure. There are Indian women with Ladino's band. I've seen them. Maybe he steals them or possibly some of them go willingly. The Indians both fear and revere the centaur, I think. There are a few *mujer-mares*, too, like Mestina. When a hybrid is born in the stronghold, the Indians expose the infant to die. Then I believe Ladino gives the babes into the care of his captive women."

Jeff Fords sighed and ran a hand through his crest of white hair. "Don't look so confused, son. I don't hardly believe it myself most times. Until I look at Mestina or see the stallion a long ways off." There was a longer pause this time. "She's a real woman in every important way. But if she's a hybrid, she will be barren."

Conant made a slight gesture with one hand. "Is this a situation in which you'd want children?"

"You understand I wouldn't let you touch her if I didn't see that there's love in it?" the old man said sternly. Then the sapphire eyes grew soft. "Because of Mestina I've been a dead man that couldn't die. She gave me a reason for living and I couldn't leave her for Ladino to capture. . . . Now about getting away. Mestina and the stallion are both mutants—if that's the right word for so big a change—so they both have extra sensory powers. I believe the stallion knows a safe path across the hot country. One end of the way must reach to the

Indian stronghold. The other possibly crosses the desert out toward the rocket lanes. Maybe you could try that and take a chance on getting far enough over to be rescued."

"You think Mestina can pick the stallion's mind, so to speak? Get inside his thoughts and learn the way out of here?"

"I'm sure she can do it," Jeff Fords nodded.

Mestina crouched at the cave mouth, completely still. Her eyes looked inward, dark and remote. Conant found that he was holding his breath fearful of disturbing her trance-like concentration.

Then she lifted her head, the delicate ears flicking as she seemed to listen mentally. Her eyes scanned the horizon, then watched a faraway point.

"I see them!" she said, her voice growing excited. "Ladino! Ladino, where is the safe path?"

There was a long silence, then she began whispering as if she talked to herself. "Ladino is very angry. He will not tell me the secret of the path . . . angry . . . angry."

Jeff Fords reached out to take one of the small dark hands into his. Comforted, Mestina stopped the shivering that told of inner fear. She began to speak again.

"Ladino lashes out at the frightened mares as he drives them before him. He punishes them when they will not turn at once as he wishes. Even the *mujer-mares* are not safe from his anger."

Mujer-mares . . . woman-mares. Conant realized that Mestina's inner vision had confirmed what Jeff Fords had told him. There were other mare maidens in Ladino's harem.

"The band is hungry. They wish to stop and feed upon the mesquite beans which grow abundantly there. But Ladino will not let them stop. Now he stands silhouetted against the sky to look back. The wind brings the scent of El Leon. I sent him to harry the band, thinking Ladino might lead them to safety along the path we wish to learn."

Conant spoke softly to Jeff Fords. "Is she really seeing them?"

"Of course. How did you think she knew where to find you, hidden in that cave as you were?"

"Ladino is raging now," Mestina reported. "He strikes the rocks with his hoofs until the sparks fly. He trumpets and whistles, driving the band with rappings of his sharp hoofs as he rears to threaten them . . . now kicking and biting until the foam on his lips is flecked with blood. . . . He turns the band. They come thundering toward us—"

"Are they near or far?" Conant asked the old man.

Fords shook his head impatiently, not taking his eyes from Mestina's face. As Conant looked at her again she gently released her hand from the old man's clasp. Then she sprang to her feet and listening for a moment, ran lightly down the shale talus slope below the cave. On the rocky floor below she stood looking intently across the mesa.

"Mestina!" Fords called anxiously. "Come back, Mestina! *Mestina!*"

He wheeled the cart around. His face, ashen and with the skin tight over the bones of his skull, looked like a death's head.

"Fool that I am!" he said furiously. "Telepathy is like that path we seek . . . two ends to it! Now Ladino is aware of Mestina. Her thoughts have led him to her. We've got to get her back in the cave!"

Conant saw then what the man meant to do. "You can't go down to her in that cart! Don't try! *Don't!*"

But Fords did not listen. He turned the frail cart and careened out and down. Conant leaped to follow, his eyes on the wasted body flung about by the crazily bouncing wheels. His broken leg would always be shorter— Forgetting to allow for that, Conant's charge threw him heavily to the talus. He half-slid, half-rolled down the slope over the shifting shales.

It was a nightmare with time stretched out of shape and the agonizing moment stretched to a seeming lifetime. Mestina in a half-trance of concentration stared across to the canyon— The cart bumped and leaped—Conant clawed at the sliding stone trying to get back on his feet.

Then galloping hooves drummed in the canyon. Ladino's band burst out, manes tossing, tails streaming, eyes rolling, heaving chests and widened nostrils drinking the wind. The mares divided around Mestina.

Before she could turn to run Ladino had seen her. Head lifted, splendid savage strength in every line, the centaur halted, gravel spurting from the brace of his forefeet. A wild triumph raced across Ladino's face. Then he flung himself between Mestina and a possible retreat to the cave.

She was cut off from any help.

Conant tore at the sliding shales to regain his feet. Mestina had seemed to flit down so easily and swiftly— He threw himself sideways . . . hung for a moment. Frantically he dug in with heels and hands to get some kind of purchase. He managed to hold himself spread-eagled on the slope . . . cautiously sat up.

He saw that Jeff Fords somehow kept his unresponsive body on the wheeled platform although at times he fluttered like a tattered pennon. Then the cart bounced onto the silt apron fanning out from the canyon mouth.

Sending the cart spurting toward Ladino the old man swung a sling in a blurring circle. When he released a thong, a rock flew from the sling to crash against the stallion's head.

Ladino screamed in a fury of rage and pain. His rough-hewn face contorted in a crazy snarl, he charged at the cart and its rider. Jeff Fords whirled under the rearing forefeet and miraculously emerged untouched. He sent another rock thudding into Ladino's ribs.

Conant hobbled half way down the slope, his lungs bursting with exertion and his heart breaking for the utter bravery of the man below him. Then a wheel came off the frail cart and rolled erratically to scatter the mares. Mobility gone, Jeff Fords snatched a dagger from some resource of his garments and brandished it in a splendid puny defiance.

The sun flashed from the sliver of steel as Ladino reared above. But the tiny wound could not retract the mountainous weight. Its sting only added frenzy to the stallion's trampling, rending attack. . . .

Sobbing in futile impotence Conant fought his way down. But long before he could reach the bottom, much less cross the canyon floor, Ladino had trampled Jeff Fords to a pitiful heap of tattered, red-stained rags.

The stallion heard Conant's wild shouting then. Flinging up his head he looked across the splintered wood and sodden flesh. Trumpeting in a crazy triumph Ladino dismissed the approaching man contemptuously.

He burst through the ring of mares that had obediently restrained Mestina and caught the sobbing girl roughly into his arms. At his command, the band raced ahead of him to plunge into the canyon and out of sight.

Conant climbed back to the cave. Hastily, he gathered a filled skin water bottle and a blanket. What dry foodstuffs he could find he poured into the memo-plastic food

box saved from the crash and now returned to its original shape. He laid the bundle beside the entrance and selected the sharpest of Mestina's lances and skinning knives.

He picked up Jeff Fords' red blanket that lay where it had slid from the wheeled platform and tumbled into the man's food platter and water jug. He looked around the cave for one last time. Then shouldering the bundles he hobbled down the talus slope again.

With his jaw locked against his aching grief, Conant folded the trampled scraps of Jeff Fords' flesh into the red blanket. Then he searched out the bottomless gash in the rocks, remembered from the trip with Mestina. Following the ritual for a dead chieftain, he placed the wrapped body on the broken cart and tugged it over to the crevice. Lacking a favorite dog to send before his master, Conant threw into the depths the sling with which the man had challenged the monster. Next followed the personal utensils of daily use. As a symbol of "the dead man who would not die" he stripped a handful of silken blossoms from a cactus and let them flutter into the darkness. The favorite horse. . . . Conant lifted the body from the splintered platform. Then he dropped in the cart.

Now that all was ready he lowered the blanket-wrapped body until the lariat that held it stretched to full length. He opened his hands and let the slight weight slip away.

He began following the tracks of the mustang band down the canyon. He didn't believe he could either find or rescue Mestina but a man had to try . . . especially with Jeff Fords' sacrifice burning like a torch in his brain. He wouldn't think about Mestina now . . . not recall the frantic grief in her awakened eyes or her despairing cry as Ladino's arms had swept her up and away.

He'd have to use what intelligence he had against the stallion's speed and strength. Hopping painfully, Conant tried to recall everything he had read about the equine race whose usefulness to man had been outgrown. Still, now that fissionable materials were becoming too scarce to use for all power sources, why wouldn't the horse be a useful means of short transportation again? No time to consider that now—

The range of a mustang band was seldom more than twenty miles across. Jeff Fords had said that the site of Conant's crash and the cave from which Mestina had brought him were about ten miles to the west. So he was midway to the band's east-west range. But it seemed improbable that the stallion frequented the barren mesa where Jeff Fords and Mestina had lived in the cave. Otherwise Ladino would have seen Mestina earlier. Conant thought the cave was probably beyond the extreme edge of the band's north-south range.

Men had captured mustangs by walking them down, dogging them

day and night without giving them an opportunity to rest or feed. Could one man alone possibly do that? Conant knew the answer but he could not accept it.

The tracks cut into the sandy floor of the canyon led east and north. Steadily, too, the terrain sloped downward to the Tularosa basin, an arid saucer rimmed with tumbled mountain ranges. The canyon broadened and grew shallow with water marks and flood debris to show that it was a major carrier of run-off from the infrequent and torrential desert rains.

Conant followed the natural roadway as fast as his leg would let him, refusing to recognize the pain and weariness that verged on exhaustion. He kept his eyes on the horse tracks now growing less distinct as the floor of the canyon became irregular plates of limestone swept clear by wind and water.

But on the little shelves of silt built up close under the canyon walls occasional mesquite bushes heavy with ripe beans were growing . . . the mesquite that had spread over wide areas carried through the stomachs of wild mustangs like these who followed Ladino. Mestina had said in her telepathic vision that the band was hungry . . . that Ladino would not permit them to stop to feed as he had followed the mental path that had brought him to the cave. Would the band stop to feed soon now?

Conant hobbled faster, taking care to avoid unnecessary noise. The

canyon widened still more and now on either side were tiny grassy *vegas*, the mountain meadows. Then around a bend in the rocky wall ahead Conant heard Ladino's trumpeting, the blood stirring half-animal, half-human call that held the tragedy of being *sui generis*, unique and alone in a hostile world.

Conant tested the wind so that his scent should not notify of his coming. Kicking off his sandals he began climbing to a ledge of rock that overhung the *vega*. He heard small tearing, rending sounds that told him the band was feeding. Cautiously, he leaned over to look.

Perhaps forty mustang mares, half a dozen young stallions surely neither old enough nor rash enough to challenge Ladino's leadership. Conant forgot to breathe when he saw Mestina— He frowned and narrowed his eyes against the sun to see better. It was another, older *mujer-mare* without Mestina's beauty. She rode a mustang controlling it with an Indian bridle, a thong tied around the lower jaw.

Between the *mujer-mare* and the overhang from which Conant looked down, grazing horses burst out as they were crowded from behind. Ladino came into view leading a mustang with one hand as he tore hungrily at the small body of something soft and furry held in the other hand. On the led mustang's back Mestina sat, her hands bound behind her.

Conant didn't stop to plan. A surge of fury flung him off the ledge

and down upon the centaur. This blood smeared eater of living flesh should not keep Mestina!

Conant's lance tore through flesh as he jolted to a sliding perch on the stallion's withers. Ladino's startled plunge tore the weapon from Conant's hand and the next spin smashed it against the canyon wall. The lance had only ripped through the hide to graze a muscle . . . and enrage the stallion to a wild frenzy.

Then Conant was falling down by the centaur's claw-like pulled hands. Above him he saw the rearing hoofs that would chop the life out of him. Then another horse rammed into the stallion with enough force to half whirl him. Conant hit the ground rolling, felt the jam of the memo-plastic food bundle flatten under him, then bounced to his feet beside Mestina! He leaped up behind her and at the same instant, the older *mujer-mare*, eyes flashing pure hate, thrust the leading rope into his hand.

Piercing the nightmare of motion, Conant heard a coughing roar rising to a wail. A tawny blur sprang through the air to land upon the stallion's back. It was Mestina's pet lion.

El Leon grasped the stallion's neck using his weight to make the twisting blow a lethal one. If the big cat had been armed with sharp retractile claws as his kind had been before mutations had changed them, Ladino's neck would have snapped. But El Leon's blunt fingers slipped and the leverage failed.

Ladino sunfished, then spun as his hoofs spurned the ground. The lion fell under the thudding smashing hoofs. Conant heard a cracking, crunching— Then the mustang he and Mestina bestrode was caught up in the stampede that swept Ladino, too, away from his victim.

Conant instinctively clamped his legs to the mustang's flanks and reached around Mestina to grab at the animal's mane. Pounding and jolting they tore along in the dusty thunder of the stampede. Ears laid back, hoofs flashing, eyes frantic, the runaway river of horseflesh rushed down the canyon in a suicidal frenzy.

Wrenching at the bridle thong, Conant tried to turn their mount aside. But the mustang was hard-mouthed and keeping his head down galloped after the band. Until the double load slowed him, they had all they could do to stay on the horse's back. When they had fallen behind the band Conant managed to free Mestina's hands and then wrench the mustang's head around.

Kicking the horse, now as anxious to stop as he had been to run, Conant tried to get every possible yard out of him. He did not think the band would run far before scattering. When his frenzy had worked off Ladino would return for Mestina.

Momentarily, with the horse plodding docilely and Mestina in his arms, Conant forgot the impending danger. To have her silken sage-scented mane under his chin again; to feel the tumult of her breast slow

to contentment; to hold the beguiling dark fingers that clung to his own; it was enough.

"El Leon saved us—" Mestina's voice caught in a sobbing breath. "As Jeff did—"

"Don't think about it now." Conant bent to kiss her trembling lips, to wipe the tears from her eyes with a fluttering rag of his tunic sleeve. "They died gladly to keep you from Ladino. We can't stop to grieve for them until I've managed to keep you safe."

"It was Yegua who rode into Ladino," Mestina murmured after a while. "I hope he did not see, for he would kill her."

"Yegua?" Conant repeated. "The older *mujer-mare*?"

"She is the lead mare of the band and Ladino's — what would you say—"

"Number one wife?"

Mestina nodded. "So she is jealous of him and did not wish me to become one of Ladino's mares. She dared his anger hoping you would take me away."

Conant remembered the eyes flashing with hate as Yegua had thrust the leading strap into his hand. But neither the *mujer-mare's* jealousy nor El Leon's life would make any real difference, he thought hopelessly.

If Ladino turned and came back alone they had only a few more minutes. If the stallion waited to round up his band they would have longer. A stampeding herd dispersed quickly and a mixed group

of mares and stallions would scatter more widely.

He urged the tired horse to a spurt of speed with drumming heels in his flanks. He scanned the canyon with despairing eyes. Would it be better to dismount and climb to the top of the walls? Then Conant's eyes widened with surprise. He had not noticed before that the mustang band had turned away from the main canyon. Here was the forking, here again the water marks and flood debris.

The band had turned down the other canyon to feed. The bend that had concealed them had been the junction of the two canyons. This main branch before them penetrated deeper into the limestones and shales of the mountains. Water followed limestone. . . .

Conant sent the mustang galloping down the steep pitch of the canyon floor. His spirits lifted hopefully and he looked down at Mestina with a half smile.

"Maybe we'll get away yet," he told her. "Water follows limestone. There's lots of limestone and the marks of lots of water. If we can find it in time there's sure to be some kind of hole where we can hide from Ladino!"

Blithely, he bent to kiss the red lips so conveniently near. But his horsemanship was too new to manage the feat and stay on the mustang's back at the same time. One moment there was the thrill of the kiss . . . the next Conant and Mestina rolled head over heels into

a flood-swept tangle of grasses and small branches.

Over the snapping and crackle of the dry debris, they heard the drum of the mustang's hoofs, soon lost in the distance.

Conant stared unbelievably at his leg. Evidently it had mended well indeed. He pushed himself up with his punished hands and found that he had only a myriad scrapes and scratches from the fall. Mestina was equally lucky.

"Now we travel on shanks' mares," he said, cocking his head to listen to the faint sounds of the mustang's passage. "If he gets past the junction, Ladino may follow him and not search for us here quite so soon."

The loss of his sandals made every step a wincing torment and their progress was so slow, Conant began to think they might as well stop. As well face Ladino and death here as around the next bend in the canyon. . . .

But he kept plodding. And around that next bend they saw the cave. From the yawning opening bats drooled out into the twilight. When the dribble grew to a dark stream, Conant knew the cavern was of some size.

Mestina drew back in fright but Conant gave her no time to balk at entering. "We have to go on," he said, "and we don't have time to look before we leap, either."

His arm around her, he urged Mestina forward. She shrank close

to him until he felt the thud of her heart quicken with fright under his hand. Almost at once the smooth sandy floor descended and the ceiling of the cave arched high above them. Overhead the bats flew in a twittering, invisible river.

"How far must we go?" Mestina asked. "Surely Ladino will not come—"

Magnified many times her words hissed back and forth like flying snakes. The sibilances became a background to the growing wail of vowel sounds that echoed and re-echoed until both Conant and Mestina covered their heads with their arms.

Until silence finally absorbed the pelting sound Mestina stood with her face buried against Conant's chest, trembling and shaking with fright. He stroked her mane soothingly, thinking of the act as "gentling her down." After a moment he realized that he was standing on a puzzling inequality of the cold damp floor. He traced it out with a bare toe—

Putting Mestina out of his arms Conant kneeled to explore with his fingers. Hoof prints! No doubt about it. Hoof prints in the damp sulphur-stinking marl.

Possibly the mustangs sheltered here . . . or possibly Ladino came. They must go deeper into the cave. Conant kept Mestina behind him as he slowly felt out the way. When the damp marl led them around a corner, he flipped on the tiny blaze of his lighter. The pinprick of il-

lumination could only show them that the next step was safe.

"Turn right now," Mestina said suddenly in the undertone that did not set the echoes flying.

"How do you know? We must take care—"

"The path is safe. I know that it is safe."

"How—does Ladino come here?" Conant asked fearfully. "Do you know the path is safe because you have learned it from him? Don't think about him, Mestina! Or he may come to you as he did before!"

"Ladino knows this cave," she agreed. "It is part of his path." She put a hand on his arm. "Let me lead the way, Con."

Conant turned to look at her. The tiny flame from the lighter glowed along the line of her cheek and reflected in pinpoints deep in her velvet eyes. Eyes vague and dreamy as they had been when she was reaching out to Ladino by telepathy.

Reluctantly Conant let her go ahead. She moved with the confidence of a sleep walker. Around clumps of stalagmites, under dimly looming curtain flows, skirting the edges of chasms lost in darkness, she led him swiftly. Always the path descended.

Conant lost all sense of direction in the maze of turns and passages. He wondered if they were turning away from the mountains and crossing under the mesa by an underground tunnel opened by primeval waters. If it led far

enough, they might safely traverse the radioactive area. More likely, they would emerge at Ladino's feet. . . .

Conant lost track of time as he had lost direction. After a while he became conscious of the muted thunder of water. Then he realized that the blackness Mestina threaded with the certainty of a blind man in a familiar room was no longer complete. Now they walked through a deep twilight that led to a glimmer far ahead.

They emerged, dazzled with the sun of a wide valley, rock rimmed and mountain walled. The murmuring water that had traversed some underground channel became a cascade thundering down into a swift river. Grass growing lush and green clothed the slopes that ran up into heavy timber. Everywhere horses grazed.

Beehive shaped huts clustered to form a village below. The primitive structures were built of saplings and brush thrust into the ground and bent over to meet at the top. The framework was clothed with bark or deerskin or a dark substance that was probably a kind of felt. From tall poles colored strips fluttered like banners.

Wind horses, the Mongol prayer flags? Apache *wickiups*? *Yurts* of the high steppes? The ethnographer in Conant leaped in alerted interest. The Apaches of the Southwestern deserts and the remnant of the Golden Horde that had overrun Eastern Europe long ago! The two

long separated races with a common origin had survived and mingled here!

Mestina touched his arm. Looking where she pointed Conant saw two men coming across the *vega* toward them. When Mestina shrank against him Conant put an arm around her and drew her forward with him. It would not be wise to seem afraid.

Conant held up a hand in what had been a nearly universal peace signal. Then he waited quietly with Mestina in the middle of the *vega*.

When the foremost approached them, he sniffed like an animal, his face contorting at the messages his nose brought him. As he turned his head, Conant saw his eyes opaque with cataracts and remembered that one of the first results of radiation had been a high incidence of blindness.

The man wore a yellow medicine shirt decorated with sun and rain symbols. Upon his long hair perched an elaborate headdress of feather and fluttering fabric strips. Pendant on his bared chest lay a medicine bag from which he drew pinches of a yellowish powder which he scattered in the direction of the strangers. Conant supposed it was *boddentin*, the magic powder made from reeds, that the Indians had believed held protective powers. On his lean body, the man wore a breechclout of dressed skin, its ends falling to his knees front and back. Buckskin moccasins tough soled and pointed of toe could reach high up the coppery-red thighs but had

been folded down to knee length.

The second man lifted his hand in a gesture of peace. Tall and hawk-faced, he looked inscrutably at Conant and Mestina with bird-brilliant eyes. Then he spoke in a recognizable distortion of *lingua mercaturæ*.

"I am Batu." He indicated his blind companion. "He is Noche, the shaman."

At first glance the men were like as brothers, different only in their dress. But the second glance found only a racial resemblance. Batu's hair was black like the shaman's, but where the medicine man's was dull and coarse, the chieftain's was silken and shining with dark red glints. His eyes were set far apart under a sloping forehead but their hard gleam came from a gray-green iris. His skin was weather burned as dark as the shaman's but there was a hint of ivory toned fairness under the bronze.

The man Batu wore trousers under a loose robe of a rough weave slit up the sides for freedom and belted with a wrapped length of brightly dyed fabric. A long thin knife was thrust into the girdle on one side; on the other an ornamented purse was held by a metal chain. Like the shaman he wore high boot-moccasins turned up at the toe tip and having a pocket at the folded top from which the bitten stem of a pipe protruded. A wide brimmed hat of felt sat primly straight on abundant black hair pulled back and braided into a waist-long plait.

The blind medicine man had halted. He stabbed an accusing finger toward Mestina while his nose sorted faint odors suspiciously.

His voice was a mingled neigh of surprise and disapproval. "A woman! A *mujer-mare*! Spawn of the devil horse Ladino! Whence do you come? And this stranger-man?"

"We seek refuge," Conant answered. "I have been cast away on the desert from a fallen ship. She helped me to survive. To escape Ladino, we have come through the cave—"

"Through the cave?" the shaman screamed. "From Noogi, the Place of Darkness Under the Earth?"

The Apaches had feared the night and the darkness; the Mongol forebears of the Kalmuks had feared the earth as the abode of devils. Here was a combination of the two superstitions.

Batu's voice interrupted. "Hush, old one. Merit is acquired by hospitality to strangers. It would seem they come in peace."

The clouded eyes darted toward the sound of the chieftain's voice like a striking snake but the shaman answered in a sugared tone. "No one has come to this valley for generations and I had forgot. Do you take the man into your *yurt* and serve him with all honor. I will see that the *mujer*-woman is safely lodged where none may molest her because of her strangeness."

Mestina caught Conant's arm. "Do not let him take me from you," she whispered. "I can see into the

dirtyness of his mind . . . see the evil he plans."

"You prate of evil?" the shaman screamed at her. "You creature of the deep darkness! Witches and evil spirits come from the cave. *Bruja!* Witch! Cursed witch!"

People had come streaming from the beehive dwellings after the chieftain and the shaman. Now they formed a tightening circle around Conant and Mestina, moving respectfully behind Noche and Batu. Curiosity was written on every face, but fear and animosity were the other side of that writing, Conant knew.

In his mind he called desperately to Mestina. If they could draw the medicine man into a contest, perhaps Mestina's extrasensory powers and his personal possessions could be used to outwit the shaman. There wasn't time to plan. They'd have to make it up as they went along. . . .

If Mestina could sense his thought. . . . *Tell him your magic is greater than his. Charge that his magic comes from evil spirits; yours from good. Challenge him! Say that your medicine is the stronger.*

And Mestina heard mentally. Her clear voice rang out to be heard by all. "How can you say that evil alone comes from the earth and the darkness? Whence comes the water that brings life to the desert?" She gestured to the fall of water plunging from the cavern. "Does not the grass that feeds your horses—and hence your children—spring from the darkness below the ground? I

have come from the darkness, but I am no witch. If I am a spirit I am a spirit of good! My medicine can overwhelm yours!"

What tricks could the man produce? Conant dredged up the last scraps of information he had about the man's savage forebears. The shamans had been masters of magic . . . rain making, fire swallowing, control of animals—

The shaman plucked a handful of feathers from his headdress. He cast them upon the ground at his feet and made commanding gestures over them. The feathers fluttered . . . swayed . . . lifted. . . . Conant wondered if this trick involved a mass hypnotism. He could not take his eyes from the moving bits. One feather rose . . . swayed . . . stood upright. Another and another. . . . All the feathers stood upon their spines swaying in a mimic dance.

A collective sigh of amazement from the watching people seemed to make the dance grow wilder. Conant tore his eyes away. Now was the time to pass to Mestina the flattened lump of the food box, stirring against his chest. Warmed by his body, its memo-plastic should regain its shape.

He called mentally to Mestina. *Take what I shall hand you. Then cast it down at your feet where the sun will strike it. Do you understand? Tell him it is a stone that you will cause to grow and produce food.*

At her side Mestina's hand reached up. Conant slipped the stir-

ring lump of plastic into her grasp.

"The feathers of the eagle, Lord of the Sky, obey my will!" the shaman shouted. "Can you do as much, *bruja?*" :

Mestina's laugh was scornful and immensely confident. "I can do more, shaman. You have only made feathers to move in the wind. What is that? I shall throw down a stone and it will grow into a food bundle!"

She cast the irregular lump of plastic that looked not unlike a piece of quartz on the sun-warmed grass at her feet. Because the food container had almost reached the critical time and temperature that would cause it to resume its original shape, its transformation was rapid.

The lump stretched, growing before their eyes, and assumed form and size. In a few moments it became a food box. Through its transparency could be seen the seed cakes Conant had thrown into it when he left the cave that had been Jeff Fords' home.

This time the amazement of the watchers caused a noisy stir. When Mestina reached down to pick up the food container and offered it to the shaman, he drew back in fear. The murmur grew puzzled and awestruck.

Conant waited tensely. What would the shaman try next? When he saw the man dip into the purse that hung at his side for flint and steel he reached into his own tunic to finger his lighter. Mestina could make fire with it— But that would not be enough. He felt reasonably sure an exhibition of fire eating

would come next. He felt in the pocket. Nothing else except the broken wrist radio that would do nothing but emit blasts of crackling static.

Now the shaman pranced about the small fire he had kindled. He lighted lengths of reed drawn from some pocket of his garments. Lifting the flaming lengths high in the air he swallowed them. Then he opened his mouth to draw them forth again still burning. Conant conceded it to be a really superior performance.

He called mentally to Mestina. *You remember the small object that can make fire? Take it from me . . . here. . .* He felt Mestina's fingers and slipped the lighter into them. She knew how to flick it on.

But it would be no excitement to make a flame appear. The same thing happened when the shaman struck flint and steel. The difference in method would not be impressive. Then he remembered another bit of Indian superstition.

He sent the thought to Mestina. *The medicine man believes his strength resides in his hair. He will not permit anyone to touch it. Bring flame to the lighter. Then toss it into his head dress!*

The shaman brought a flaming reed out of his throat for a last time. Then he stood panting but triumphant, sure that nothing could top his performance.

"My medicine is stronger than yours, O eater of flames!" Mestina said scornfully. "I, too, can make fire to come at my command." She

flicked on the lighter, the small flame seeming to come from the ends of her fingers. "And I also can make the flame obey me. I command it to destroy your strength, O shaman!"

As she lifted her arm to throw the lighter, Conant pressed the stud of the wrist radio. Here in the mountains and the heat it should pick up static— The tiny radio howled and went into an ear splitting crackle. And Mestina threw the lighter, unseen, into the medicine man's headdress.

Conant hoped the noise might be mistaken for the summer thunder that sometimes was heard after a lightning bolt from a clear sky. Indians and Mongols alike had held an awesome fear of lightning, "the sky arrows."

In a puff of flame, the shaman's feathers caught fire. Howling, the man snatched off and hurled away the headdress, but his long greased hair had started burning. He cast himself on the ground and rolled, pulling at his fiery locks in a frenzy.

"The lightning! The arrows from heaven!" The onlookers hid their faces in superstitious fear. "The *mujer-mare's* medicine is the greater. The shaman is punished by the Great Blue Sky!"

The fire was out now and the medicine man back on his feet. But as he groped blindly hunting a way through the circle, the people moved away from his pleading hands, refusing him the aid of their eyes. The fear and revulsion on their

faces as they did so spelled the death of his influence in the village.

Conant and Mestina looked at each other with carefully noncommittal eyes. Then they relaxed enough to draw the first full breath for minutes.

They might be safe in the Indian stronghold now.

Conant opened one eye, then closed it again. He drew Mestina closer into his arms, burying his face in her sage-scented mane. He settled into the comfortable warmth of the fur robes piled on the floor of the *yurt*.

But his eyes opened again; he was fully awake in spite of himself. He lay relaxed and contented staring up into the thong-bound willow lattice of the hut. Lazily he watched a thin blue thread of smoke find the opening at the top of the cone and escape into the gray of dawn.

He examined the now familiar interior of the *yurt* with a continued respect for the efficiency of its arrangement. For the pared-down-to-essentials way of life it served, it would be hard to improve upon. Now the two-panel door set into the south side of the felt-covered wall was closed against the cold morning of the high altitudes. On the left side of the door cupboards held a supply of household utensils. Opposite the door were the shrine, complete with images of the gods, and a low platform where the bed furs and blankets were kept. Chests for garments and treasures and a

heap of felt floor cushions completed the furniture.

With the exception of a small circle in the center of the *yurt* the floor was covered with quilted felt. In the circle a tiny fire of dried dung burned under a pot upheld on interlaced and legged iron rings. The flicker of the fire highlighted brightly painted designs on the chests, glinted on the silver of the drinking cups, and gilded the polished bone and reed of bow cases.

Conant heard an impatient stamping and snorting outside. That was the horses tied to the hitching place in front of the *yurt*, ready for him whenever he wished to ride. These Nomads (Conant had found the continual repetition of Apache and Kalmuk a nuisance and had, long since, given the blended tribes a name that suggested their stage of civilization,) with horses in plenty never walked when they could ride.

It was a notion with which Conant had come to agree wholeheartedly. He rode with enthusiasm, wondering at times if he had a remote ancestor from these People of the Horse. Certainly, here with the Nomads and Mestina he had found his *querencia*. Here he was at home.

He lifted himself upon an elbow to look down into the furry nest where Mestina lay. Stroking back the silken forelock tumbled across her forehead he kissed her lightly. A smile came into the corners of her mouth but she slept on. Conant lay back folding his arms under his head

and remembered yesterday. It had been like most of his days now spent in the saddle or filled with hard physical activity that sent him to his bed at sundown, drugged with a pleasant fatigue.

Yesterday Batu, the chieftain, had taken Conant on one of the training trips he made almost daily with his young son. The schooling for war actually began in infancy, then accelerated when a boy reached fifteen or sixteen. Woodcraft, the making and use of weapons, horsemanship, tests of endurance such as icy swims, long runs, going without sleep for forty-eight to seventy-two hours, and proficiency in all hard exercise made up the curricula for the young warriors.

Batu, with typical Nomad care and love for children, worked with unconcealed pride to make Kayitah ready for the war path. So long as the tribes were prisoned in the valley, the training was theoretical based on a long tradition that was almost instinctive. But the Nomads believed that some day a way would be found to escape. So the boys were prepared according to the ways of their fathers.

Yesterday the problem had been fighting from horseback. Conant had envied the grace and agility with which the boy Kayitah rode out from ambush. Guiding a half wild pony with his knees he had set three yard-long arrows in a target as he galloped past. Again and again the boy charged down a rocky hillside brandishing a fifteen foot lance or clat-

tering it against his shield of toughened hide.

Once he had fallen when the horse stumbled, but he had bounced to his feet instantly. Catching the horse's mane he had pulled himself to the animal's back again, still carrying the long lance. It was then when Batu, that stolid one, had let his love and pride become visible on his face that Conant knew he had been accepted as a friend.

Conant thought about these bronzed people that the men of the effete cities he had left behind would call brutish savages. Were they? These Nomads had a definite social code—and what was more important, lived by it. According to their conception of the truth as something shared between friends and family only, they were truthful. They did not steal from their own tribesmen although stealing and not getting caught at it was a virtue when practiced against outsiders. They paid their debts and obligations scrupulously. If a member of the family faced a serious drain on his resources such as a daughter's puberty rites or the death ceremonies for a father or mother, other members helped him. They were open handed and generous to a fault. They fondly loved their children and never abused and almost never punished them. Their old people were cared for and honored. The women of the tribe worked hard and made loyal and faithful wives.

The Nomads were a happy merry people completely contented with

the simplicity of their lives. By limiting their needs they were never obliged to overwork themselves to obtain luxuries. Unhurried, they took time to savor every experience to the limit. They had none of the unrest, the discontent that made the lives of "civilized" people only a choice between the greater and the lesser evil. For example their work with the horse herds—

Conant sat up with a yelp that brought Mestina to an elbow looking sleepily curious. He began thrusting his legs into loose felted trousers and pulling on a long side-slit robe. Through the folds of the last he answered Mestina's question.

"We're going with Batu this morning to choose horses for breaking. Up to the farthest herd. And I forgot. Hurry!"

But when Mestina reached across him for the short tunic that was her only garment, Conant took time to catch her velvety softness into his arms. She shrugged back her shining mane with a small characteristic gesture and looked at him with her brown velvet eyes soft with love. Conant kissed the nape of her neck where the golden softness was irresistible as a baby's silken head, and then the small hollows of her throat. . . .

The stamping of hoofs grew louder and the voice of Batu outside made remarks about slothful sleepyheads and a ribald guess about what kept them abed so late. Conant opened his arms to let Mestina go.

She kissed him fleetingly and reached for the forgotten tunic. Stopping only to swallow a few mouthfuls of *kumiss*, the fermented mare's milk that was the mainstay of Nomad diet, they went out to Batu.

Behind the *yurts* of the village the mountains opened out to small interlocking valleys that climbed steadily to a pass. Here the grass grew even greener. Batu's finest horses moved about grazing under the watch of the herdsmen and their boy helpers. Mestina and Conant rode with Batu around the natural pasture, bounded at one end by cliffs dropping to the river far below and at the other by a rocky passage to the summit.

Batu pointed upward with his whip. "One man must watch the Gates there to keep the horses from straying. Below and on the other side of the mountain is the Ground that Glows in the Dark."

Conant looked speculatively at the mountain barrier that shut the Nomads from the roving life that was bred in their bones as a dam holds back a river. What would happen as their numbers increased? Would the people leave behind them the noble simplicity of their life in the saddle? Would they become cultivators of the soil and city dwellers? Or would a new race emerge, of which Mestina was a forerunner, whose pressure would break the radioactive barrier? It would be interesting to record and coordinate any changes he himself observed—

Conant frowned. More and more he found himself thinking in terms of a lifetime spent among the Nomads. But here in the comparative safety of the village Mestina could undoubtedly pick up the thoughts of the centaur and ferret out his knowledge of a safe passage-way through the contaminated country. Since men lived inside the region supposedly fatal to all life, Conant could believe in a passage through country that had similarly failed to become radioactive. But when Mestina did learn of the passage, he would go with reluctance. It was fascinating to observe a people embedded in their past as a fly is eternally preserved in amber.

Batu had brought along three speedy and well trained lasso horses to use in cutting out the horses to be broken. He equipped Conant with the Mongol lasso, a slender willow pole fifteen feet long with a rawhide running noose at the end. With the herdsmen, Batu rode into the herd and began separating the horses wanted for breaking from the rest.

Guiding the lasso horses with their knees, the Nomads dashed through the band after the marked youngsters. Almost at once the intelligent lasso horses understood which animal was wanted and chased him in and out among the hundreds of others until his rider could drop the lasso and make a catch. Then the lasso horse stopped abruptly and haunched down to take up the strain when the loop dropped

around the neck and was drawn up between the youngster's ears. Two deft twists by the rider made the loop into a halter. Then the animal was drawn out of the herd to join the group held by the herd boys.

Sitting his own mount at one side Conant watched the first cutting made with neatness and speed. Then when a wanted animal raced toward him Batu signaled with an upflung arm and a wordless yell. Conant drummed his heels against his horse's flanks. The horse fanned out to head the runaway without really waiting for any direction from his rider.

Twisting, turning so abruptly that Conant clung to his mane to stay on, the lasso horse drove the youngster away from the herd. He raced beside ready for the catch and throwing his head in a gesture that amusingly told his opinion of his rider when Conant missed his first cast. Trying again, Conant was successful. It was scarcely possible not to be with the horse doing everything except using his teeth to twist the noose around the youngster's neck.

"I don't know why you don't go a step farther," Conant yelled at Batu. "Train the lasso horses to snatch the ones you want out by the ear. Why do they need a rider?"

The chieftain shook his head. "The rider is the horse's brain. That is an old proverb of my people."

"Then Ladino should be—" Conant began.

"He is a devil horse and we fear

him. He has only part of the horse's strength; only part of a man's wisdom. If Ladino should have a son with *all* the strength of the horse and *all* the brain of the man—"

"Ladino is a hybrid and therefore sterile. He cannot reproduce his kind."

The Nomad shrugged. "Who can say what can, and cannot, be? There have been many changes since the long ago time when the ground was made to glow."

"Mutations."

"The word I do not know. The fact is plain to see," Batu answered. "Now let us get back to—" He stopped abruptly, then pointed up the slope.

Against the blue sky caught in the notch, the centaur silhouetted for an instant, head upflung and nostrils tasting the wind. Then with a high pitched trumpeting he plunged down at the herd.

Already excited by the working, the horses began to pour down the pasture like an avalanche. Caught in the van, Batu and the herdsmen would have to outride the panicked horses. Further down where the *vega* widened they could turn and control the band.

Conant fought to control his own mount then raced to Mestina. If Ladino saw her—

He lashed her horse with the rawhide loop of the lasso, hoping the animal would bolt out of sight in the serrated cliffs that walled that side of the pasture. But the sting of the lash whirled the animal instead.

Ears laid back and eyes rolling Mestina's mount caromed off the racing river of horseflesh. Mestina was unseated and flung aside.

It was the shaman who turned the running into blind stampede. The man seemed to spring up from the ground. Certainly he rose in front of the thundering leaders of the herd. Going up to high places to commune with the spirits had been a regular part of Noche's routine, Conant knew. Now that he had been discredited by Mestina such help as his gods could give him was more than ever necessary. But his gods had not warned him to crouch unseen in the crevice from which he had emerged.

The tags and feathers of his garb whipped in the wind. He ran in short darting rushes, hands out and head thrown back, his voice a whining scream. The man's Apache forebears, wily eaters of the white man's beef, had been adept at causing stampedes but they could not have planned a more certain method of insuring panic. The horses went into a stampede, senseless with fright.

The shaman went down under the galloping hoofs. Conant heard the beginning of a scream. Then there was only the stream of horses, at first dividing around the trodden heap fluttering with tags and feathers. In seconds the body was no longer an obstacle. And the rushing river poured over and obliterated it.

Curses like prayers tore at Conant's throat. Mestina was dangerously near the edge of the

stampede, staggering to her feet after her fall. As he raced to reach her a horse, pushed out of the stream, rammed his mount. Conant was flung beside Mestina, to the ground that shuddered with the pound of running hoofs. He arched his body over hers and closed his eyes at the imminent death.

But the horses swerved aside, even in panic frightened of the centaur. Noche, the shaman, had his moment of revenge then, even if he had died for it. The stampede had turned Ladino, too. And he had caught sight of Mestina.

The thundering dust was pierced by his triumphant scream. Galloping up, he swerved in a skidding stop and his lean arms swept the girl from Conant's protection. A hoof scraped the side of Conant's head and pain seared like a hot iron. Then Ladino was gone, galloping up the slope to reach the pass.

Something in Conant's whirling head spoke to him clearly. *Let her go. What else can you do except get yourself killed? If Ladino takes her then she will surely find the safe path. And find some way to tell you. You couldn't take a mujer-mare back to civilization, anyway—*

With a violence that denied the inner voice, Conant struggled to his feet. He couldn't let her go. He could die . . . as heroically as Jeff Fords had done . . . even as the beast El Leon had done . . . to save Mestina from the stallion's savage embrace.

It was the loop of the lasso that

downed him that time. Again he fought the pain and the exhausted lurching of his bad leg to stagger to his feet.

The scene seemed to have frozen in its violence. Below where the *vega* widened, Batu and the herdsmen shouted and rode, turning aside the tiring leaders of the stampede. But beside Conant the panic stricken horses still raced past like the rapids of a living river, plunging, momentarily subsiding, crashing together, trampling, smothering, mutilating each other . . . and presenting an impassable barrier to Ladino.

The stallion had raced up the slope to go behind the stream of horses and so reach the pass. But the river flowed on. Ladino whirled and galloped back. He thundered down upon Conant swaying and propping himself erect with the willow pole of the lasso still held in his hand.

Someplace Conant had read about gladiators sent into the arena with nets to fight against tridents. With the same desperation they must have felt, he cast the lasso at the centaur.

When it fell over Ladino's throat, Conant threw himself backward to put every ounce of his weight into the closing of the noose. But the centaur's jarring stop yanked him upright again.

Pulling the long Nomad knife from his girdle Conant leaped at the stallion.

Driving the steel into Ladino's neck he prayed that it would reach

the great artery. He would have no second chance.

The probing steel missed a vital spot and Conant crashed to his knees. Raging, Ladino flung Mestina aside to concentrate on the killing of this man. Rearing, he struck down at Conant with flailing hoofs. His hands clawed at the trailing lasso, its loop still around his neck.

Conant dodged under the hoofs. He couldn't avoid the down coming death . . . but a man had to keep trying. He flung himself away from Mestina, lying in a small quiet heap barely out of the path of the stampede. *Not bring Ladino down on her, too. . . .*

Ladino's chest struck Conant's shoulder. He saw the blazing hate in the stallion's eyes as he fell, saw the teeth ready to rend and tear. But the crushing impact did not come.

The last wave of running horses caught the rawhide lariat still hanging from Ladino's neck as they plunged down the steep slope that led to the cliff edge. A hoof faltered . . . a horse fell against another . . . pulled down a third. Their tangled weight pulled Ladino into the fighting screaming mass. Like wreckage caught in a whirlpool, the stallion was swept under, emerged again for an instant, eyes bulging and mouth gasping for air against the throttle of the lariat. Then he was swept onward and was gone, plunging over the precipice with the maddened horses.

Conant crawled to Mestina. He cradled her in his arms, murmuring

as he stroked back the silky forelock tumbling across her closed eyes. She lay still, softly furry and somehow shrunken as Conant remembered a dead squirrel from his first boyish hunt. He tightened his arms around her, his lips moving from the dark cloud of her mane down to the velvety softness of her throat. And there a faint throb against his mouth told him that she was not dead.

He rubbed the limp dark hands that were so oddly appealing and frantically called to her. When her great dark eyes opened at last she stared vaguely for a moment. Then the velvet depths grew soft as she recognized him and the small dark hands clung to his.

Batu came galloping, having turned and saved a part of his herd. In the instant when he looked from Mestina to the concerned face of his friend, Conant thought of many things. His lifetime and Mestina's would be spent in this hidden valley, for the secret of the safe passage through the contaminated region was gone with Ladino. He was not sorry. Life here was good. There would be no more centaurs, for Ladino had been a hybrid and therefore sterile. . . . So too, would be his mating with Mestina, but if there were no children there were compensations in the noble simplicity of the Nomad life. And Batu had said, "Who can say what can, and what cannot, be?" If there could be a son to train and love. . . .

For some distant day—Conant was suddenly sure of it—the

Nomads would ride out of their high valleys, like a driven plow they would break up the burgeoning weeds of wealth and debt and servitude that choked the growth in the garden of the world. When the rotting faiths became effete cynicisms and freedom no longer struggled in the entanglement of parasite regulation, then the men of the valleys would break up the festering stagnation and release the world to new beginnings.

The little creature stirred in the secret glade where his mother had hidden him. Small hoofs and thin wobbly legs tucked under him, he had remained quiet for many hours. The light had come and gone, the warmth had been swallowed by cold darkness, then come again to stay his shivering. But his mother had not returned.

A long time ago she had left him at the whistling call of a great stallion who had come to the secret glade. The small creature had looked wonderingly with vague baby eyes when the great one had crossed the grass to stand above him. He had drawn away and then submitted to the oddly gentle stroking of a rough hand, had curled baby fists around a proffered finger. Then a trumpeting thrilled through the glade and the great one was gone in a thunder of hoofs.

The small creature struggled up to stand swaying on wobbly knock-kneed legs. He took a tentative step, bringing up against one of the bushes

that walled his tiny home. Without purpose, he nibbled at the browse with soft lips. He chewed and swallowed. Then he nipped at the bush again. The strange food stayed his gnawing hunger.

He set to work to make a meal of the small green leaves of the desert shrubs. He pushed his way through the walling green and stepped out into the open. There he tried a bite of the soft fruit of the tuna, persisting even when its spines pricked his sensitive mouth. He stared at the cactus thoughtfully for a time. Then he pawed at the branches until he had knocked off some of the watery pods. He broke open the tuna fruit with his hoof. Then he ate the smashed watery pulp delicately.

His stomach stayed, the centaur colt moved about all the day cautiously exploring his widened world. Often he paused to look off across the mesa to the distant mountains. Sometimes he saw a far off cloud of dust that moved and hid the animals that raised it. The colt watched, instinctively aware that the swift creatures were his own kind. The band of mustangs headed toward the mountains.

Those distant mountains seemed to beckon the colt as well. But in the twilight now falling rapidly as the sun was lost behind the peaks the

miles between glowed with radiant gleamings, beautiful and baleful. The colt watched fascinated as the glow deepened as darkness fell. But he was instinctively aware of the danger.

Suddenly lonely, the colt turned to go back to his secret glade. Then a strange thing happened. He heard a voice calling, a warm, soft, friendly voice. And it spoke to him inside his brain.

If you are out there somewhere, Child of Ladino, be sure that we are your friends. We are your own kind, too. We are waiting for the centaur with all the strength and swiftness of the horse; with all the wisdom of a man. If you are that awaited one come to us. We can be friends, not enemies. Come . . . come . . . come.

The colt stood listening long after the voice had died away. It had been a mothering voice, the yearning voice of a woman as yet denied a child of her own.

Night had blotted out the blue spires of the mountains now and deepened the baleful glow of the angry fires. Ladino's son turned away, going back to the safety of his secret glade.

There was a way across the valley of fires. He was sure of it. Some day when he was a little older and a little stronger he would find it.