

FANTASTIC UNIVERSE

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H. L. Herbert
President

Leo Margulies
Publisher
Editorial Director

Bert Lief
Cover Design

two
way
destiny

by . . . Frank Belknap Long

They were alone on an enchanted planet, a lost Eden glowing with beauty and strangeness. But over them hung a cloud of tribal hate.

SHE WAS KNEELING when I saw her, her face half in shadows, her girlishly slender figure mirrored by the cool-running stream at her feet.

You'd think that on a planet like Dracona a man would be safe from shock. Between the fire mountains and the sea, and the snowy-crested birds that never stop singing you'd think that nothing could surprise him.

Remember Blake's City and Garden, his New Jerusalem with its shining Eden just over the hill? Well—Dracona is just as tremendous as that, even though it's all a garden wilderness with the city part left out.

Surely on Dracona there was enough nerve-tingling beauty everywhere to enchant a lad with my capacity for enjoyment. Why couldn't I have accepted that beauty as a near approach to paradise, content in the knowledge that I was my own master under the stars? Why did I have to step into a forest clearing and let a slender pale girl strip away all of

As science fiction has increased its speculative scope there has come into its orbit a new and largely unexplored world of shining possibilities—the world of comparative ethnology. Why do some primitive human societies glorify hate, fear, cruelty, war, and others live at peace with their neighbors? In this unusual novelette the gifted and versatile Frank Belknap Long has penetrated to the very core of the mystery with dramatically compelling logic.

my defenses, leaving me as naked as a new-born babe to the great, roaring winds of unreason?

If I had shouted the question then and there the forest might have murmured in reply: "It's because you haven't seen a woman for so long. It's because loneliness is a destructive blight, and you're a young romantic fool."

It might have shouted that to my mind, to the tumultuously pounding blood at my temples. But it wouldn't have been a complete answer.

I knew she wasn't from Earth the instant she raised her eyes, and looked at me. Mocking eyes she had, of a deep, lustrous violet, and her pale hair clustered in little, golden ringlets about her brow, giving her the tantalizingly defiant aspect of a woman with enough of the eternal tease in her to be secretly amused by her own beauty.

She was collecting zoological specimens in the pollen-scented Draconian dusk. Not me, especially. Just iridescent spider bats, darter birds with vermilion beaks, and flying lizards which measured forty-eight inches straight across their wing-tips.

To be strictly accurate—there was only one lizard. It was thrashing wildly about in the metallic net at her back, the glow from the stationary lure-light giving it the aspect of some fiery monster which she had enticed from its cave by

her beauty, and trapped at the risk of her life.

As I returned her stare she blinked in amazement, then laughed outright, the gulfs between us dissolving in a sudden, warming intimacy that was like nothing I'd ever known before.

To keep the scales from dipping too cruelly to her side I threw in everything I had that could be weighed and measured. Mother Earth still gives her sons a good start physically. Surely I was big and strong enough to please her, with a grip no man could break.

Furthermore, I knew how to look after myself. I'd been born and bred to the thunder of primitive rocket jets, and I could walk any jungle like a native, bargain and hold my own. I was a man who would fight tooth-and-nail to justify what I was and always would be at heart—an Earthborn trader.

We of Earth are traders still! We haven't forgotten how to rejoice when waterfalls crash on rocks white with foam, and the mists of morning rise clear and cold to the wheeling stars. I was prepared to tell her what that meant in terms of human dignity, human worth.

I was prepared to remind her that the real target of a trader is the unknown. Everything else he does, or fails to do, is a prelude to the kind of wayfaring that brought the restless human breed to Tragar.

Tragor! The scales started dipping her way, and I couldn't stop them. She was a woman of Tragor, with the star-bright insignia of her heritage gleaming on the folded-back flaps of her weather-jacket.

I thought of how human civilization had shifted from Earth to the stars, and what it meant to stand at the hub of the Galaxy in Tragor City. I thought of Tragor City as a man will who is eager not to remain a child in the eyes of one who has never known the meaning of childhood.

I thought of the thousand square miles of research laboratories, the museums and the libraries, the sports arenas swimming in a golden radiance and the sky-mirroring splendors of the biogenetic fulfillment centers. I thought of the schools where teaching had become an exact science completely integrated with human needs.

I remembered that no woman of Tragor could ever become tender and yielding without first dissecting a man. I told myself she'd see through me the instant I spoke to her. With her understanding of the conflict between the sexes the primitiveness in me would stand out like a gall blister on a sturdy oak.

Right at that moment I didn't feel so sturdy. But I knew I'd have to speak first. I couldn't just stand there staring her out of countenance.

"I'm sorry if I startled you," I

said. "I didn't mean to stare, but I couldn't very well help myself. I don't quite know how to say it. You're not just an attractive woman. I wouldn't have stared if you were just one woman in ten—or one woman in twenty. I stared because I think you're the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

She flushed scarlet. "I thought you'd never stop staring," she said.

"You're angry," I said. "Don't be. Many men must have told you how beautiful you are. I just happen to mean it."

"Please," she whispered. "Are Terrans always that abrupt?"

"We have a reputation for candor," I said. "If I hadn't told you why you left me speechless you'd have been angry for the wrong reason. You may take that as a compliment."

"I'm not sure I want to."

"You must know how lovely you are," I protested. "Why should you resent being told the simple truth?"

"Perhaps this is one of my bad-tempered days," she said, her eyes searching my face. "You don't look like the kind of man who would deliberately try to embarrass anyone. No man is wise enough to be gallant by design, and make the pretense seem casual and completely honest. You're right, of course. I had no reason to be angry."

She came toward me, straight-

ening her hair, her eyes crinkling with undisguised amusement.

"I still don't know who you are?"

"The name's Hargon," I said. "Taro Hargon. I came here to trade with the natives. I get on fairly well with them."

Her eyebrows went up. "Natives? I haven't seen any."

"You will," I promised her.

You can accept almost any reality when it's thrust upon you, even the wonder of a woman of Tragor facing you in a wilderness Eden with a warmth so unmistakable it makes your senses reel.

Her name was Kallatah, and she had come to Dracona alone in a faster-than-light cruiser to collect zoological specimens for the natural history museum at Tagga. Just for the record, Dracona's the fourth planet of a second-magnitude sun in the Constellation Cygnus, and it's as far from Tragor City as it is from Earth. Tagga is a suburb of Tragor City—a white and beautiful metropolis in its own right.

"It's my first important assignment," she told me. "Naturally I've got to make good at it. You see, there's a new director of biological research on the Guiding Council, and from all reports he's the kind of man who is only impressed by results. When I have my first interview with him he'll forget I'm a woman. I'll have to shine as a scientist who doesn't make mistakes."

"You've made one already," I told her.

I walked past her, stared into the net. The captive lizard was twisted into a repulsive-looking knot, its verdigris-colored tail thrashing furiously back and forth. Draconian flying lizards are monstrous brutes. They're four feet in length and have a metallic green sheen to them, and when they have reason to hate their jaws can close with a ferocity unparalleled in nature.

Visualize a Tyrant King dinosaur with ribbed, skeletal wings, reduced to the dimensions of a kangaroo, and you'll have a fairly accurate mental picture of one.

All they do is eat. Birds and small mammals, fruits, berries and nuts. In twenty-four hours a Draconian flying lizard can eat three times its weight in food. But a man is safe if he keeps his distance, for they are lazy by nature and don't attack without provocation.

"They're taboo animals," I told her. "The natives call them 'Servants of the Mountain.' If your purpose was to infuriate the natives you couldn't have made a better start."

She returned my stare with a strange mixture of alarm and defiance. "I had no way of knowing that!" she protested. "This planet is down on the charts as uninhabited. A virgin wilderness. If there are intelligent primitives here—"

Her face grew suddenly strained. She stared about her as if seeking an answer for something intangible that was pressing in upon her thoughts and undermining her confidence in herself.

I was feeling it too. A kind of cold unpleasantness with underpinings of loneliness and dread. When you're thousands of light years from Earth you've got to hold tight to your anchorage in the past, your primal birthright of friendship and trust.

There were a thousand ties linking me to Earth, and that distant jungle world was just a stopping off point to me in a web of heart-warming memories that sustained me night and day. No matter how lonely I became I could always tell myself that I'd soon be going back to the people and places I'd known all my life. I was far away, sure. But there would always be friends awaiting my return.

Freeze that memory chain, shatter the brittle links, and the human mind has no refuge left anywhere in time or space. I had only to substitute Trakor for Earth to know how Kallatah must have felt. But before I could move to her side all of the links snapped, and we were caught up in a jungle new and terrible and strange, with all points of reference stripped away.

I'd experienced that horror before and I knew exactly what to expect.

It began with a dull flickering, a faint shifting of light and shadow at the edge of the clearing. Leaves swirled up from the forest floor, and a solid wall of vegetation began to sway, to tremble and twist about. As Kallatah cried out in alarm a tangled mass of bright, toadstool-like growths split up into dozens of spinning fragments, the air about them crackling and bursting into flame.

With a sudden, roaring sound a tree collapsed, dislodging a screaming shrewlike beast that scampered into the clearing with its tail between its legs. There was a moment of awful silence while the jungle built up tensions past all sanity. The clearing became a trap brimming with a malevolence as unnerving as the ticking of some hidden detonating device.

A black blur of panic rose to encompass me as a concentration of hatred almost palpable plucked agonizingly at my mind. I was following the motion of the foliage with sick horror when out of the jungle came another beast, web-footed, walking upright.

In utter silence it stumbled to and fro, its froglike body glistening with swamp water, its stalked eyes luminous with fright. It advanced and retreated, bent double, and went into a kind of frantic waltz.

What happened then was as unexpected as it was terrifying. The light grew dazzling again, as if a cloak of fire had descended

on the clearing. With a harsh screeching the frog leapt high into the air and was slammed back against a tree by a force that ploughed a furrow in the ground clear across the clearing.

I watched it sink to the ground with a broken back, shaken both by the violence which had been done to it, and an unnerving glimpse of Kallatah's white face staring at me from the shadows. So terrible was the wrath unleashed that it had taken on a blind purposelessness. I knew that everything in the clearing was marked for destruction unless—

I crossed to where Kallatah was standing, and gripped her by the shoulders.

I spoke urgently, almost harshly. "The natives are watching us!" I warned. "When they saw you capture that lizard their anger got out of hand. Do you understand? They're trying to kill us with their minds."

"What can it mean?"

She swayed against me and I caught the faint fragrance of her hair. She was trembling so I wondered if she had really heard me, or if the fear in her voice was no more than an echo of the dread she must have felt on seeing the frog-creature go hurtling through the air.

I started shaking her, forcing her to look at me. "They're poltergeists," I told her. "They can set fires and move objects from a distance. The power resides in

an area of the brain which civilization seems to blunt. It's an ESP faculty which was part of man's original survival equipment. Our cavemen ancestors could reach out with their minds in that way too."

She still seemed not to hear me. In desperation I raised my voice, continuing to shake her. "They get to our minds first—in a horrible, primitive sort of way. They strip our minds bare so that we'll feel isolated—lost. Primitive man could kill off his enemies in the same way—by paralyzing them with a mental projection of the jungle as a kind of trap. Paralyzing them with fright, then closing the jaws of the trap."

"I don't believe it!" she almost sobbed.

"You'll be convinced if you don't do as I say!" I warned.

She drew back from me, as if firmly determined not to be convinced.

"You find out these things by studying primitives in different stages of development," I went on urgently. "Don't forget—I'm an Earthborn trader. You of Tragor may scoff, but I've studied dozens of primitive humanoid groups. I know that they can be won over if you handle them just right."

"What's just right?"

"Play along with me," I urged. "Follow my cue."

"Play along—"

"An old Earth expression.

We've got to play up to them, put on an act."

Before she could protest or cry out I swept her into my arms. I ran my hands through her hair, raised her chin, and kissed her—very firmly and determinedly for an instant.

"This is part of the act," I whispered.

Being a woman of Tragor, she could hardly have believed that my impulsiveness had been prompted solely by a desperate human need for companionship in a moment of shared danger. She must have known it went deeper than that, and she would have been right. A giddiness swept me like a gusty hurricane wind on a tidal estuary bright with a thousand pulsating tropical blooms.

I released her suddenly, and she leapt back, her eyes startled and accusing. "You're either a madman or a sick child!" she whispered.

"We'll talk about it later," I said. "Now is not the time."

"I feel sorry for you."

"Later."

The clearing quieted down, and there was silence for a moment. Then out of the forest they came, walking three abreast. Geipgos, the old tribal chieftain, and his son Slagoon, and the warriors with their rippling muscles glinting in the pollen-scented dusk, and their spears held high in a cautious withholding of wrath.

You couldn't call it a greeting.

They were still shaken with anger, still ready to kill.

I went forward to meet them, with Kallatah in the crook of my arm. I'd talked and bargained and haggled with them a dozen times, but now I was seeing them for the first time through her eyes.

I have a curious gift of empathy. I could share her awe and admiration, and the stunned incredulity which must have made her doubt the evidence of her eyes.

The natives of Dracona are physically comely and well-proportioned, and they carry themselves with such an air of easy grace that you have to look twice to realize that they are not entirely like ourselves.

They have three eyes, but the extra one is so smoothly lidded that when it remains shut you scarcely notice it. Their three extra, slightly attenuated arms are not obtrusive, for they carry them pressed closely to their sides. And the green sheen of their skins looks more bronze than green in the forest gloom, and is hence far less startling than might be supposed.

They had such keen, discerning eyes, and mobile features that when they smiled in friendly greeting it was hard to think of them as primitives at all.

They were not smiling now.

I tightened my hold on Kallatah's wrist, and looked Geipgos straight in the eye—the big forehead eye which opened slowly to

glow with fierce reproach and scorn.

"Mukith Mani-Bumini!" I said. That translated out as: "I would know the reason for your displeasure, old friend!"

It was an excellent beginning and it brought an instant, completely understandable reply. The fire mountain had been complaining all day. Now the reason was clear to all. One like myself, only a female, had taken captive a Servant of the Mountain. Her punishment and death must follow as a matter of course.

Geipgos' three eyes watched me, as if seeking in the frailties we had in common some excuse for my defense of such a female monster.

"Tun Huhji Swan," I said. "This woman is more dear to me than life itself."

I waited for his astonishment to subside, then went on quickly. "She is my mate. She is the adored one of my heart. The Servant of the Mountain flew to join us when he saw how deliriously happy we were. He wished to give us his blessing."

It was a good beginning only if I could convince Geipgos that the lizard had flown into the net of its own free will, and had its own peculiar reason for not wanting to leave.

"The Servant of the Mountain is free to go," I said. "He waits only to rejoice in the complete consummation of our happiness."

"He waits to rejoice?" said Geipgos.

"In the glorious fulfillment of our happiness, yes."

It was the wisest thing I could have said, for primitives everywhere are natural-born feast makers. Rejoicing in the happiness of the newly-wed is second nature to them.

I could see that Geipgos was impressed. He raised his arm, and gestured to the warriors. Still scowling, but without hesitation, they strode past us, grouped themselves about the net and started prodding the lizard with their spears. Gently, firmly, and with great deference.

Suddenly the startled creature gave a shrill scream, swung about, and began untangling itself. The warriors leapt back in awe, lowered their spears, and waited to see what the Servant of the Mountain would do next.

It went right on screaming.

It was still screaming when it left the net like a bat out of a well. Straight across the clearing it soared and into the trees, missing Geipgos by a scant twelve inches.

What it did was perfectly natural under the circumstances, but its effect on Geipgos was tantamount to the lightning conversion of a miracle enacted for his benefit alone. He swung toward me, utter self-castigation in his eyes.

The Servant of the Mountain had been wiser than Geipgos. It had stayed until prodded, indicat-

ing a desire to stay. Amends must be made for the doubting of a friend. The female, my mate, must be the guest of Geipgos.

Kallatah stared at me with a wild surmise. "What did you tell him?" she asked. "What did he say to you?"

"We're to go to their village," I told her. "We're to go as honored guests."

At a command from Geipgos a litter sixteen feet square was set down before us, and we got into it. Four tall warriors grouped themselves with prideful eagerness about the conveyance, and lifted it to their shoulders. Geipgos and his son fell back with gestures of deep respect, and a procession formed behind us, and we were borne forward across the clearing like the idols of some primitive fertility cult whose wrath could shrivel crops and cause a blight to descend upon the land.

Amidst shouts of jubilation and an incredible bowing and scraping we were borne swiftly along a jungle trail between towering walls of vegetation. And then out on a sloping mountainside which overlooked a valley swimming in a deep, golden haze.

The trail descended the mountain in a corkscrew curve, with many evil-looking twists and turns. To be carried on a litter down a steep trail is always hazardous and I would have preferred to remain silent. But when I saw how alarmed Kallatah looked I

thought it best to keep right on talking.

Across the valley loomed the largest volcano on Dragona and as I gestured toward it I did my best to sound cheerful.

"That mountain has our friends worried," I said. "It's been rumbling off and on for weeks. You've got to remember that to a primitive a fire mountain is just about the most terrifying object in nature. Why do you think those lizards are taboo animals?"

I laid my hand on her arm. "An accident of nature, nothing more. The lizards live just inside the crater, high up where the heat can't harm them. Naturally they've become identified with the volcano. To Geipgos and his warriors the ugly-looking beasts are Servants of the Mountain who can stay its wrath. Capture them, abuse them, and the wrath of the mountain will be unleashed in all its fury. The pattern is a primitive one, but completely logical from their point of view."

Kallatah looked at me steadily for a moment. "It almost became a pattern of death for us," she said.

"I know," I said. "But don't forget it's an ugly pattern for them too. A pattern of never-ceasing terror, of semi-starvation."

One of the warriors thrust his face close to us to ask if we were all right. I nodded, and he fell back with a gratified grin to re-

sume his position in the procession.

"It's tragic how one little taboo can hold a race back," I went on. "You've seen how keenly intelligent they are. If that taboo hadn't plagued them for hundreds of years they'd be truly civilized by now."

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Kallatah said. "What do you mean by a pattern of starvation?"

"Those lizards eat the natives out of house and home," I told her. "Literally—and it's horrible. When we come to the village you'll see what emaciated skeletons the women and children are. The lizards are so sacred they can't be killed off without angering the mountain."

It was then that Kallatah surprised me. She gave a low whistle.

"You mean that tribal law has decreed that?"

"Precisely. They breed fast and eat voraciously. You can't have agriculture and the storage of fruits and grains—any kind of stable handicraft culture even—with vicious tyrants like that on every patch of cultivated land. By rough estimate those beasts consume millions of tons of food a year. Even the small animal life is vanishing."

"And they don't dare kill one," Kallatah said. "It sounds insane."

"All primitive fear taboos are insane," I told her. "They're symptoms of the stark lunacy which possesses the human mind

before it gets hold of the tools it needs to grasp the real nature of the physical world. Even when it gets such tools," I qualified, "a society can be psychotic in a more complex way. All societies are probably psychotic in one way or the other, but that's another story entirely."

"But the adult males seem well fed," Kallatah said, her eyes on the trail ahead. "How could starved children grow up into such robust-looking adults?"

"Deprivation has left its marks," I told her. "You've got to remember that only the strongest survive where the infant mortality skyrockets the way it does here. And those that do reach manhood have bad teeth, poor digestion—all kinds of psychosomatic ills. What you are seeing here is the warrior caste strutting its might. A warrior caste will *always* find a way to eat."

She didn't speak again until we were at the base of the mountain, and the village was coming swiftly toward us through the haze.

"You still haven't told me how you managed to turn aside their wrath," she complained. "Just what did you say to them? Why are they bringing us here? Did you expect me to understand the gibberish you used?"

Dared I be completely honest? I decided it would be tempting fate to tell her exactly what I had said to Geipgos. She'd find out soon enough. Meanwhile, I needed

time to plan my strategy and come up with something workable that wouldn't make her hate me too much.

The sudden appearance of the children saved the moment for me, sparing me the necessity of further evasion. They were playing on the plain directly in front of the village, racing to and fro with the eager abandonment of all children everywhere.

They used their five arms to good advantage, tossing mud cakes at one another, blinking and grimacing with a demoniac expressiveness, pretending to be dead from famine one instant, and then, in the twinkling of an eye, coming exuberantly to life again.

For an instant Kallatah's face radiated only maternal solicitude, a gentle sweetness untouched by rancor. Then, all at once, she seemed to realize how emaciated they were, how completely different from ordinary children. Her head came up, and her eyes blazed with indignation.

The blaze grew hotter as the lizards added fuel to it. The revolting creatures were everywhere—on slanting mud banks lush with berry-laden vegetation, on fields that sloped away to mist-filled hollows, even within easy pouncing distance of the children.

They ignored us as we were borne past, their carrion-repulsive heads bobbing to and fro. They were devouring everything edible within reach of their forepaws,

swaying back and forth and cramming the food into their mouths with a voracity which was sickening to watch.

Miraculously the children ignored them, and went right on playing.

The procession moved on in silence, straight toward a picture of human misery so tragic and pitiful that no man of good will could have contemplated it without a shudder.

The village consisted of twenty-five or thirty huts, each with its central supporting pole, and spreading straw roof. The women sat about listless and sullen in doorways, apparently not caring at all how unattractive they looked, or what a disillusioning impression their complete lack of amorous allure must have made on the returning, better-nourished warriors.

But there is something about the imminent prospect of a nuptial ceremony that infuses joy into even the most dispirited, and the instant they saw us they leapt up with one accord and came flocking around us. Old and young, tall and short, comely and ugly.

The warriors carried us to the central hut and set the litter down with prideful flourishes of their long arms and broad, straight shoulders. Instantly shouts of jubilation echoed through the village. There were no brass bands, but the brass band spirit was tremendously in evidence.

A child of ten came up, bearing garlands, and a girl with skeleton ribs, and vermilion-painted cheek-bones presented Kallatah with a beautiful shell bracelet mottled yellow and black, slipping it on her wrist before she could recoil in protest.

She was still protesting when we were ushered into the hut, Geipgos grinning and bowing and his son standing straight and still and with a smirk of anticipatory amorousness in the midst of the women.

"Geega Drun Fra Hul," Geipgos said. That translated out as: "We will leave you now. Later we will rejoice together in the great joy which has overtaken you. Ah, that I could be as young as you are on such a night as this."

The din outside continued for a moment and then gradually subsided.

We looked at each other.

Night was already descending over the clearing. It falls fast on Dracona—a blanket of impenetrable darkness settling down. Just by craning our necks we could look out into the clearing and see the last glimmer of dusk departing. A star appeared in the sky as if by magic, but we just sat there exchanging meaningful glances, Kallatah's face shadowed and curiously withdrawn.

Suddenly she spoke. "You didn't fool me for a minute."

"Fool you?" I said slowly. "I'm afraid I don't undertand."

"Oh, you understand, all right. You're very clever—or *think you are.*"

"I wasn't trying to be clever," I told her. "It looked pretty bad for us. They would have killed us both if I hadn't talked them out of it."

"You could have told me!" she flung at me, her eyes abruptly accusing. "Why did you have to make a secret of it?"

"A secret of what?"

"You didn't think I'd guess straight off? You didn't give me credit for knowing even that much about the psychology of primitives?"

"You're talking in riddles," I protested. "You're taking too much for granted."

"Am I? The things *you* take for granted are beyond belief. I know exactly how your mind worked. You told yourself they were angry enough to kill impulsively. You had to give them the strongest possible reason for *not* wanting to kill us. Isn't that so?"

"Well—"

"There's a very old saying that has a universal application," she said, a stinging contempt in her voice. "All the world loves a lover. I thought of it instantly myself."

"You did? If I had known—"

"Keep quiet and let me finish. You told them that I was *your woman*. You probably added that the whole ridiculous insanity was recent enough to be celebrated right here in their own village.

Naturally that did it. Whisper the words 'nuptial ceremony' to a primitive and you've transferred to him an inward glow that makes him your friend forever.

"If he's old he remembers what it meant when it happened to him. If he's young there's the rapture of anticipation. Besides, primitives like display and drama, human giggling and embarrassment just as much as you do. You of Earth still throw rice, you know. We have passed beyond such foolishness, but there are times—"

She looked at me and giggled. It was the cruelest thing she could have done because, despite the giggle, there was a cold mockery in her stare that castigated my Earthborn heritage and made me feel ridiculous.

It was then that she *really* threw the book at me. "Instead of discussing the whole matter as an anthropological problem that could only have been solved by analyzing it in a calmly scientific and detached way you acted as if you thought me capable of making an embarrassing situation out of it."

She stood up abruptly, removing the binding circlet from her hair, and shaking her head until the freed tresses descended in a tumbled red-gold mass to her shoulders.

"Prudishness is both barbaric and childish," she said. "It has nothing to do with modesty and reserve, which are admirable

when a man and a woman do not know one another well enough to feel at ease in an atmosphere of mutual respect and admiration."

There was a heavy silence for an instant. Then very calmly and deliberately she took off her weather jacket, folded it, and laid it on the floor at her feet.

"It will do for a pillow," she said. "I hate sleeping without a support for my head."

I stared automatically at her bare shoulders, the way I might have stared if a blinding vision of paradise had appeared to me between sleeping and waking and vanished in a flash.

"What makes all this so amusing is the way it parallels a good many of the farcical situations in the ancient folk writings of Terra," she said. "I've made a comparative study of them, and they really are precious."

The precise set of her waistline seemed to annoy her, and she changed it perceptibly, loosening the binding straps until I caught the barest glimmer of white between them. She stared at me with patronizing pity, as if my startlement was tantamount to a further step downward into the murk of a prudishness so childish that it branded me as a barbarian without a single redeeming trait.

She stared through and beyond me, her eyes stabbing the shadows, her voice derisive in its composure. "For some reason a man has to pretend that a woman is

his wife. There's a wealthy relative to impress, or a primitive conveyance breaks down, and a thunderstorm compels the pair to take refuge in a wayside dwelling.

"There is only one sleeping compartment available and what do you suppose the man does? The sane scientific approach would be to behave like an intelligent human being. When a man and a woman are alone together excessive prudishness is ridiculous. Why with such a charming companion available should he not relax as I am doing—be completely natural and human and at his ease? Why should he not sit down and discuss art and philosophy, music and the dance the whole night through?

"But does he—in the ancient folk writings? No. The silly fool gets up, takes a blanket and creeps out into the night. He shivers in the cold for no reason at all. Owls hoot at him, but he still persists in making himself ridiculous until the dawn comes up."

I looked at her for a long moment in silence. It has never been difficult for me to take a hint. I knew, of course, that women have a remarkable capacity for burying their real feelings beneath a dozen or more carefully arranged masks for the sole purpose of keeping a man guessing. But I decided not to even attempt to peel off the masks. It would have been too dangerously time-consuming.

Fortunately I was wearing heavy enough spaceleather to protect me from the cold. I wouldn't need a blanket, and there were no owls on Dracona to hoot at me.

"I'm afraid I'm still too much of a primitive to find our ancient folk writings amusing," I told her.

Without another word, ignoring her abrupt, startled gasp, I swung about and went striding out of the hut into the cool night.

I slowed my stride the instant I found myself alone under the stars. So far I'd gained a respite. But I knew that what remained to be done could backfire and destroy me. She'd stepped into a situation more complicated than any we could have planned together. Nature had set the stage for it before her arrival, and the performance was about to begin. If the first act went wrong the music might well become a dirge, and the final curtain descend on a funeral landscape as bleak as a fire-ravaged tinder box.

A half mile from the village there was a hill where I could get a clear view of the volcano, and the cloud that hung poised above it night and day, its peculiar configuration giving it the aspect of a gigantic black moth flailing the air with soot-encrusted wings. For centuries that cloud had hung there, and would probably remain until the volcano burnt itself out.

I skirted the shadows until I was clear of the village and then I walked with my shoulders

squared until I reached the hill. On Dracona a man must walk boldly if he is to walk at all.

It was cold on the hill—chillingly bleak and depressing. But I knew that my spaceleather would keep me warm enough. Thinking of Kallatah's violet eyes and the incredible glints of gold in her hair I threw myself down and lay stretched out at full length in the velvety darkness.

My eyes were on the cloud when the strange, startling play of colors began. First a flash of red on the underside of the cloud, and then a flash of dazzling violet piercing the cloud. Red, violet, and then red again—each color lingering for perhaps ten seconds.

I took out my instruments then, and made a careful check. My equipment consisted of a tiny electro-magnetic linear strain seismograph which was sensitive to a tremor as faint as one ten-billionth of an inch, and a vertical recorder which gave me a picture in two dimensions of the surface tension at the edge of the crater ten thousand times enlarged.

I watched the cloud and studied the instruments, waiting until I was completely sure. Then I arose, brushed the dirt from my knees, returned the instruments to their cases, and started back down the hill.

When I reached the village there was no stir of movement anywhere. I did not trade on my

luck by pausing to explore the shadows. I went straight to Geipgos' hut, pushed the boughs aside, and crept inside on my hands and knees.

Geipgos was sleeping on a couch of matted vines with his arms interlocked on his chest, the green sheen of his skin, and the prominence of his cheekbones giving him an eerily mummified aspect.

I knelt at his side, got out the little reflector and strapped it to my forehead. I had to pause an instant to control the trembling of my hands.

The light came on in a sudden, blinding glare. I was hardly aware that I had switched it on until I found myself staring directly into Geipgos' startled eyes.

To get anywhere with hypnosis you've got to start fast. I looked Geipgos straight in the eye, passing my hand swiftly back and forth before his face, giving him no chance to realize that he was no longer asleep. The abrupt, almost intolerable glare was my greatest immediate asset.

"Yon Honi Erun," I whispered. "The Servants of the Mountain are very evil."

Geipgos blinked furiously, and his eyes widened in stark, incredulous terror.

I went on quickly: "You have always known them to be wicked—monstrously wicked and hateful. How repulsive they are in appearance alone, with their long

scaly bodies so like the bodies of the shadow monsters which you feared would tear you piecemeal when as a child you disobeyed your parents.

"Do you not remember how you ran screaming from your father's wrath and hid in the dark, wishing that you might be a man grown, mighty in your contempt and defiance? You have always known the Servants of the Mountain to be hateful. But in your great fear you dared not say to yourself: 'They have brought me nothing but disaster!'"

Geipgos groaned and his eyes rolled.

"You dared not say," I went on relentlessly, "what you knew in your heart to be true. You dared not say: 'The Servants of the Mountain are false servants. They have brought my *people* nothing but disaster! When a man is hungry must he starve? Must the fruits of his labor, the harvest that he has sown not only for himself alone, but for the adored ones of his heart be snatched from him?'"

Geipgos' eyes took on a strange glaze and his lips began to tremble.

"Soon the sky will be red," I told him. "Soon the ground will shake. Soon the wrath of the mountain will be terrible against its false servants."

Geipgos tried to rise, but I gripped his arm and compelled him to keep his eyes riveted on the reflector. "They are not true ser-

vants, for they anger the mountain. The mountain would drive them forth, but without your help how can the mountain free itself? The mountain has no legs. It cannot walk about and seek out its false servants when they descend on the village."

For the first time in Geipgos' life a deeply buried part of his mind was stirring tumultuously. I could tell by the way he gnashed his teeth, and swung his five arms about that he was raging inwardly.

You cannot hypnotize a man against his will. You can not force him to do something that will outrage his moral sense. But what I wanted Geipgos to do had the sanction of nature and common sense, and the sanction as well of the wild, unruly part of himself that has shaped his destiny from childhood. I was playing both ends off against the middle—against a ridiculous straw man of a hated taboo.

"When you have done what you must do the mountain will cease to be angry," I told him. "It will rejoice with you."

Then I told him what had to be done. I implanted the command with as much majesty as I could summon, dimming the reflector with my palm so that he could see me clearly.

"The mountain will rejoice with you," I repeated. "The sky will cease to be red. The ground will cease to tremble."

I left him then. I left him and

hugged the shadows, moving stealthily from hut to hut. Into thirty huts I crept and roused the sleeping warriors with the same hypnotic dazzlement. And to each I whispered the same words, and imposed upon them the same urgent post-hypnotic command.

It is always unwise to take pride in a difficult task accomplished with ease until the last obstacle has been overcome, the last hurdle surmounted.

I almost did—until I walked through the high-arching entrance of the thirty-first hut, and found myself confronting a warrior wide awake and on his feet.

"I have been awaiting your coming," Geipgos' son said.

Our Earth heritage is rich in legends. The great poets, the myth-makers, have all paid homage to the shining strength, the courage and daring which sets a king's son apart from ordinary mortals.

And the king's son came in his wrath and smote them. Terrible was he in battle, shod in fire and fury, rallying the vanquished with his might.

I had never believed it. But I was startled and must have shown it, for into Slagoon's eyes came a look of mocking triumph.

"Gru Huhu Frum," he said. "I followed you when you left the village. I watched you making magic on the hill."

"It was not magic, son of Geipgos," I said. "I was talking

to the mountain. Would you doubt the word of a guest?"

"I would doubt the word of a guest who does not speak the truth."

There was no need for further speech between us.

I measured him with my eyes, the length and breadth and thickness of him. He had kept himself in fine physical trim, despite the demon of hunger which must have dogged his footsteps night and day. A lean panther is more dangerous than a well-fed one; a man with gaunt cheeks and protruding ribs a treacherous adversary if his muscles have retained their resiliency, and the will to wrestle and slay is strong in him.

He had five hands to my two. He was armed and I was weaponless and his weapon was a cruel one, a curving blade with a bone handle, ground to a deadly sharpness.

When you're girding for a life-and-death struggle it's best to whittle your adversary down to size. I told myself that I was a civilized man with a resolution he could never hope to match. He would fight like a savage, granted. But I was sure that two hands guided by a trained intelligence could grip and hold, twist and bend twice as well as five hands animated by a blind urge to kill.

I squared my shoulders and started walking straight toward him. I was encouraged by the way

he returned my stare, as if the look of confidence in my eyes had planted a sudden, disturbing doubt in his mind. It was enough to assure me that if I kept my head and closed in relentlessly my chances would be good.

I gave him no opportunity to strike at me with his mind. I advanced to within six feet of him, and maneuvered myself into a crouching position with a grimace so scornful that his eyes remained riveted on my face.

I came up out of the crouch like a coiled spring unwinding. With shattering violence I hurled myself against him, bone against bone, solid cartilage against hard gristle. He let out a yell, and went careening backwards like a feather in the path of a hurricane.

Subconsciously I must have expected him to crack his skull against the baked mud wall of the hut, and flatten out at my feet. Otherwise why was my next move so long delayed? He must have gotten at my mind a little, for I stood like a man bemused while he hit the wall, twisted about, and came swinging back toward me, his eyes filmed with pain and shock.

The lunge he made was so accurately gauged that the bone handle of the knife grazed my cheek. He was trading on his reflexes, the sure instinct of a primitive strong in battle, confident of his own strength. I leapt back, and sent my right fist crash-

ing into his stomach. The blow staggered him, but not enough. With a deliberation unbelievable in one so hurt he slashed at me twice.

Just in time I ducked out of range, bent low and came up in a weaving crouch. I started hitting him, raining blows on his face and chest. I thought I heard his jaw crack, but as I whirled back to get a good look at him he laughed like an insane monkey, and transferred the knife to another hand.

He lunged again and I ducked again, and it went on in the same nightmare fashion until the knife was gleaming at the tip of an attenuated arm that followed my movements like a zigzagging lightning bolt.

He transferred the knife eight times, his laughter an insane echo as he weaved about. Desperately I dove for him and tried to knock the weapon away, but each time he was too quick for me.

His eyes burned with defiance and derision. But I suddenly saw that his mouth was beginning to sag, the lower lip trembling with unmistakable weakness.

I don't quite know how I got the knife away from him. But get it I did. I closed in suddenly, struck him a body blow that sent him reeling, followed him as he went backwards and wrested the weapon from him before he could recover his balance. I hit him again, and he went down, and I

stood wrathfully over him.

He looked at me, his eyes filled with bewilderment and horror.

"Trag Unil Deguna," I said. "I've beaten you man to man in honest combat."

Suddenly his eyes widened, and all of the insane rage was gone from his face. "It is true," he whispered. "The Mountain must have given you his strength. How else could you have conquered the son of a Chief?"

"In no other way," I assured him.

"Does the Mountain now speak with your voice?"

"The Mountain is closer to me than it is to its false Servants," I told him.

I bent and gripped him by the shoulders. "You are young and strong," I said. "The son of a Chief. Only such a one can truly lead his people. If when the Mountain speaks and the sky becomes red you leap straightway into battle at your father's side against the false Servants I will spare your life."

He sat up and rubbed his chin. His eyes were still awestruck, and I was confident that if the mountain itself had entered the hut, and spoken to him he would scarcely have been more eager to obey.

"I will do as the Mountain desires," he promised.

"You will not have long to wait," I assured him. "Soon the wrath of the Mountain will be

terrible against its false servants. Sit here quietly and be patient. You will see."

It was almost dawn when I returned to the central hut. I walked in boldly like a man coming home a little later than usual with some tremendous bright surprise for his wife that would take the curse off his lateness.

Kallatah was asleep with her weather jacket rolled up under her head, a look of almost childlike innocence on her face. She looked so beautiful that I was afraid if I knelt and kissed her she'd shatter and fly apart like one of those ancient statues that have lain for centuries in the buried past of the Earth.

There was no need for me to wake her. The rumbling did it. It started far off, and came slowly nearer, sweeping down upon the hut like the drums of primitive warfare beating at first in ominous undertones and then ever more loudly as they converged upon their mark.

The drums were nature's own, and they were beating deep within the ground. With the beating came a heaving and a quaking, and right where I was standing a jagged rent appeared suddenly in the dried red clay which had been baked by Geipgos himself to line the floor of his hut.

I had timed the eruption with the sure instinct of a trained scientist who knows just how to fill in the gaps left by the hair-

trigger measurements of precision instruments with an intuitive sixth-sense. It could have occurred an hour sooner or an hour later, but I wasn't surprised that it occurred when it did.

Only Kallatah was surprised. She awoke with the first quake and looked up at me. Her eyes grew wide and startled, and suddenly she was on her feet, clinging to my arm and screaming.

I shook her until she grew quiet, then drew her to the hut's swaying entrance and pointed out into the flame-streaked shadows. Flashes of light were converging on the village from all directions, cascading over the thatched roofs with their central supporting poles, sending women and children scrambling frenziedly into the open.

"The volcano's in full eruption!" I whispered.

"How can you stand there so calmly?" Her face was white. "If a quake opens a fissure at our feet—"

"We'll never know a moment's pain," I said. "It's the one great danger. The lava flow won't reach the village."

"How do you know?"

"I used some very sensitive instruments to measure the banked up lava flow and the intensity of the central fires with a minimal margin of error," I said. "I knew almost precisely to the hour when the eruption would occur. It's a

fairly severe eruption, but not a major one."

"You knew—"

"It's been building up for days. It should be over in an hour."

She started to reply, then swayed toward me in blind panic.

It wasn't a stampede exactly. The lizards didn't emerge from the shadows in a single onrushing column, but in threes and fours. Maddened with terror they darted to and fro between the cowering, screaming women and children, their distended eyes and metallic body sheen mirroring the fiery sky glow.

They lunged and parried, striking out with their claws as they circled about as any savage animal will when it feels itself to be hopelessly trapped. There was a blind purposelessness in their movements, a frantic swaying and thumping that churned up the ground beneath them and sent clumps of uprooted vegetation spinning in all directions.

The sky glow became more fiery, spilling over in crimson splotches, turning the village thatch poles into redly glowing fingers pointing mountainward as if in remorseless accusation. The rumblings grew louder, the quakes more frequent.

A woman ran into the open with a child in her arms. She set the child down with a look of calm, tender solicitude on her face, picked up a rock and hurled it at a lizard. Other women joined

her, clustering about her as if to draw strength from that straight unbending figure. The lizards veered away from her, and she stood with the infant in her arms again, a picture of quiet heroism.

Kallatah's eyes were shining. She seemed to have lost her fear, and suddenly she too was joining in the attack on the lizards. She picked up a stone and hurled it, and her laughter rang out defiantly above the screams of the natives.

More lizards appeared, creating such panic that a few of the women ran shrieking back into their huts again. The sky had become a solid sheet of flame, and every hut in the village was writhing in fiery radiance.

There was a continuous loud scrambling and flapping noise as the lizards tried in vain to take flight. Something had crippled and imprisoned them in the flame-streaked region between the huts and they were powerless to escape from it.

I didn't know exactly what was going to happen. I wasn't sure just how the first destructive assault would be made on the lizards, whether the mental tensions would increase first, or the physical ones shatter the beasts with a sudden, explosive violence.

With poltergeists you can never be sure. The powerful waves of their thoughts and emotions sweep through their minds in erratic currents, and when a post-hypnotic

command enters the picture—

We didn't have long to wait. With a shrill scream one of the lizards leapt high into the air and was slammed back against a tree, so violently that it sagged to the ground without a single convulsive quiver of expiring life. A fire broke out where it lay, danced and flickered about it. Another lizard was lifted high into the air, and sent spinning with a terrible spasmodic contraction of its entire bulk.

The scramblings of the other lizards became more frantic, turned into a hideous twisting and squirming that sent chills coursing the length of my spine. Horribly one of the beasts exploded. Its chest was blown away as it reared on its hindlimbs, and was carried backwards by a whirling spiral of flame. Others were ripped apart as if by invisible talons, flattened out, crushed and shredded into fragments.

We saw the warriors then. Straight into the village clearing they strode, Geigpos at their head and his son Slagoon walking proudly at his side. They were flourishing their spears and shouting, and the sky glow was bright on their green-bronze shoulders, and was mirrored in their eyes.

I had been right in my prediction. In less than an hour the rumblings ceased and the ground stopped trembling. The fieriness vanished from the sky. But for three days the warriors pursued

the lizards across the crater's rim, descending into the smoke-filled clefts where for centuries they had nested and multiplied, routing and shattering them until Dracona was cleansed and a brave new dawn broke over Geipgos' unbowed head.

I stood with Kallatah on a cloud-wreathed peak staring down.

"When man is free to shape his own destiny," I said, "civilization does not beat its shining wings in vain. They will go forward boldly now, with the yoke of superstition forever removed from their necks."

"Thanks to you," Kallatah said.

"It was not too difficult to predict the exact moment of the volcano's eruption," I said. "As for the post-hypnotic command—you could have done that too."

Kallatah turned and looked at me, her eyes strangely luminous. "Taro Hargon," she said. "I am going to tell you something. From the first moment I saw you I knew that you were a *man*."

I stared at her, wondering.

"It takes the courage and daring and resourcefulness of the Earth-born to do what you did. The Guiding Council realized that we on Tragor had need of the Earth-born too. Our heritage had worn too thin. So they selected a man of Terra with truly great gifts of body and mind to guide us all—"

I grew alarmed, still wondering how insecure my secret had become.

"Oh, you returned for a lark. Took to wandering again, as an Earthborn trader. For an hour and a day."

She laughed and her hands were suddenly busy at the flaps of my weather jacket, peeling them back to bring the shining insignia into view.

"Supreme Councillor and Guide," she whispered. "I knew it from the first."

"You knew—"

"Oh, my darling, yes. I guessed, I knew. In the hushed great halls the footsteps of a man like you were solely needed. The Guiding Council had vision and strength too—the courage to break through all taboos and seek the one right man for a task no other man could do.

"Naturally you are human still.

In my presence you felt at first a certain shyness. I could see that you were searching inwardly for flaws that might have made you seem unworthy in my eyes. It was a boyish, foolish trait—and from that moment I loved you with all my heart. To be great and doubt one's greatness is the surest path to a woman's heart."

I reached out and took her into my arms. "No man is a safe guide when he walks alone," I said. "It is time that the Councillor took a wife."

"Yes," she agreed. "It is time."

There was silence on the peak as we stared down together into the shining valley far below.