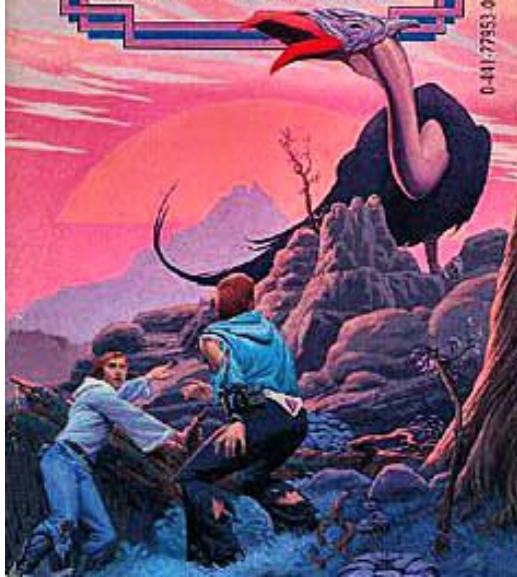


**MARION
ZIMMER
BRADLEY**

STAR OF DANGER

A NOVEL IN THE CLASSIC DARKOVER SERIES

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Star of Danger

The Darkover Series Book 04

MARION ZIMMER BRADLEY

LARRY PUSHED BACK the heavy steel door of Quarters B building, and emerged into the thin cold cutting wind of the courtyard between buildings. He stood there shivering, looking at the sky; the huge red sun hung low, slowly dropping toward the horizon, where thin ice-clouds massed in mountains of crimson and scarlet and purple.

Behind him Rick Stewart shivered audibly, pulling his coat tight. "Burr, I wish they had a passageway between the buildings! And I can't see a thing in this light. Let's get inside, Larry." He waited a minute, impatiently. "What are you staring at?"

"Nothing." Larry shrugged and followed the other lad into Quarters A, where their rooms were located. How could he say that this brief daily passage between Quarters B-where the school for spaceport youngsters, from kindergarten to pre-university, was located-and Quarters A, was his only chance to look at Darkover?

Inside, in the cool yellow Earthlike light Rick relaxed. "You're an odd one," he said as they took the elevator to their floor. "I'd think the light out there would hurt your eyes."

"No, I like it. I wish we could get out and explore."

"Well, shall we go down to the spaceport?" Rick chuckled. "There's nothing to see there but starships, and they're an old story to me, but I suppose to you they're still exciting."

Larry felt exasperated at the patronizing amusement in Rick's voice. Rick had been on Darkover three years-and frankly admitted that he had never been beyond the spaceport. "Not that," he said, "I'd like to get into the town-see what its like. His pent-up annoyance suddenly

escaped. "I've been on Darkover three weeks, and I might as well be back on Earth! Even here in the school, I'm studying the same things I was studying at home! History of Terra, early Space Exploration, Standard Literature, mathematics--"

"You bet," Rick said. "You don't think any Terran citizens would stay here, if their kids couldn't get a decent education, do you? Requirements for any Empire university."

"I know that. But after all, living on this planet, we should know a little something about it, shouldn't we?"

Rick shrugged again. "I can't imagine why." They came into the rooms Larry shared with his father, and dumped their school books and paraphernalia. Larry went to the food dispenser-from which food prepared in central kitchens was delivered by pneumatic tube and charged to their account-and dialed himself a drink and a snack, asking Rick what he wanted. The boys stretched out on the furniture, eating hungrily.

"You are an odd one," Rick repeated. "Why do you care about this planet? We're not going to stay here all our lives. What good would it do to learn everything about it? What we get in the Terran Empire schools will be valid on any Empire planet where they send us. As for me, I'm going into the Space Academy when I'm eighteen-and goodness knows, that's reason enough to hit the books on navigation and math!"

Larry munched a cracker. "It just seems funny," he repeated with stubborn emphasis, "to live on a world like this and not know more about it. Why not stay on Earth, if their culture is the only one you care about?"

Rick's chuckle was tolerant. "This your first planet out from Earth?"

Oh, well, that explains it. After you've seen a couple, you'll realize that there's nothing out there but a lot of barbarians and outworlders. Unless you're going in for archaeology or history as a career, why clutter up your mind with the details?"

Larry couldn't answer. He didn't try. He finished his cracker and opened his book on navigation. "Was this the problem that was bothering you?"

But while they put their heads together, figuring out interstellar orbits and plotting collision curves, Larry was still thinking with frustrated eagerness of the world outside-the world, it seemed now, he'd never know.

Rick didn't seem to care. None of the youngsters he'd met here in the Trade City seemed to care. They were Earthmen, and anything outside the Terran Zone was alien-and they couldn't have cared less. They lived the same life they'd have lived on any Empire planet, and that was the way they wanted it.

They'd even been surprised-no, thunderstruck-to hear that he'd learned the Darkovan speech. They couldn't imagine why. One of the teachers had been faintly sympathetic; he'd shown Larry how to make the complicated letters of the Darkovan alphabet, and even loaned him a few books written in Darkovan. But there wasn't much time for that. Mostly he got the same schooling he'd have had on Earth. Darkover, even the light of Darkover's red sun, was barred out by walls and yellow earth-type lights; and the closed minds of the Terran Zone personnel were even more of a barrier.

When Rick had gone, Larry put his books away and sat scowling, thinking it over, until his father came in.

"How's it going, Dad?"

He was fascinated by his father's work, but Wade Montray wouldn't talk about it much. Larry knew that his father worked in the customs office, and that his work was, in a general way, to see that no contraband was smuggled from Darkover to the Terran Zone, or vice versa. It sounded interesting to Larry, though his father kept insisting it was not much different from the work he'd done on Earth.

But today he seemed somewhat more communicative.

"How about dialing us some supper? I was too busy, today, to stop and eat. We had some trouble at the Bureau. One of the City Elders came to us, as mad as a drenched cat. He insisted that one of our men had carried weapons into the City, and we had to check it up. What happened was that some young fool of a Darkovan had offered one of the Spaceport Guards a lot of money to sell him one of his pistols and report it lost. When we checked with the man, sure enough, he'd done just that. Of course, he lost his rank and he'll be on the next spaceship out of Darkover. The confounded fool!"

"Why, Dad?"

Wade Montray leaned his chin on his hands. "You don't know much Darkovan history, do you? They have a thing called the Compact, signed a thousand years ago, which makes it illegal for anyone to have or to use any weapon except the kind which brings the man who uses it into the same risk as the man he attacks with it."

"I don't think I quite understand that, Dad."

"Well, look. If you wear a sword, or a knife, in order to use it, you have to get close to your victim-and for all you know, he may have a knife and be better than you are at using it. But guns, shockers, blasters, atomic bombs-you can use those without taking any risk of getting hurt yourself. Anyway, Darkover signed the Compact, and

before they agreed to let the Terran Empire build a spaceport here for trade, we had to give them iron-clad guarantees that we'd help them keep contraband out of Darkover."

"I don't blame them," Larry said. He had heard the tales of the early planetary wars on Earth.

"Anyway. The man who bought this gun from our spaceforce guard has a collection of rare old weapons, and he swears he only wanted it as part of his collection-but nobody can be sure of that. Contraband does get across the border sometimes, no matter how careful we are. So I had quite a day trying to trace it down. Then I had to arrange for a couple of students from the medical schools here to go out into the back country on Darkover, studying diseases. We've arranged to admit a few Darkovans to the medical schools here. Their medical science isn't up to much, and they think very highly of our doctors. But it isn't easy even then. The more superstitious natives are prejudiced against anything Terran. And the higher caste Darkovans won't have anything to do with us because it's beneath their dignity to associate with aliens. They think we're barbarians. I talked to one of their aristocrats today and he behaved as if I smelled bad." Wade Montray sighed.

"They think we're barbarians," Larry said slowly, "and here in the Terran Zone, we think they are."

"That's right. And there doesn't seem to be any answer."

Larry put down his fork. He burst out, suddenly, "Dad, when am I going to get a chance to see something of Darkover?" All his frustration exploded in him. "All this time, and I saw more through a gate on the spaceport than I've seen since!"

His father leaned back and looked at him, curiously. "Do you want to

see it so much?"

Larry made it an understatement. "I do."

His father sighed. "It's not easy," he said. "The Darkovans don't especially like having Terrans here. We're more or less expected to keep to our own Trade Cities."

"But why?"

"It's hard to explain," said Wade Montray, shaking his head. "Mostly they're afraid of our influence on them. Of course they're not all like that, but enough of them are."

Larry's face fell, and his father added, slowly, "I can try to get permission, sometime, to take you on a trip to one of the other Trade Cities; you'd see the country in between. As for the Old Town near the spaceport-well, it's rather a rough section, because all the spacemen in from the ships spend their furloughs there. They're used to Earthmen, of course, but there isn't much to see." He sighed again. "I know how you feel, Larry. I suppose I can take you to see the market, if that will get rid of this itch you have to see something outside the Terran Zone."

"When? Now?"

His father laughed. "Get a warm coat, then. It gets cold here, nights."

The sun hung, a huge low red ball on the rim of the world, as they crossed the Terran Zone, threaded the maze of the official buildings and came out at the edge of the levels which led downward to the spaceports. They did not go down toward the ships, but instead walked along the highest level. They passed the gate where-once before-Larry had stood to look out at the city; only this time they went on past that gate and toward another one, at the far edge of the port.

This gate was larger, and guarded by black-clad men armed with holstered weapons. Both of the guards nodded in recognition at Larry's father as they went through into the open square.

"Don't forget the curfew, Mr. Montray. All Zone personnel not on duty are supposed to be inside the gates by midnight, our time."

Montray nodded. As they crossed the square side by side, he asked, "How are you getting along on the new sleep cycle, Larry?"

"It doesn't bother me." Darkover had a twenty-eight hour period of rotation, and Larry knew that some people found it difficult to adjust to longer days and nights, but he hadn't had any trouble.

The open square between the spaceport and the Darkovan city of Thendara was wide, open to the sky, and darkly spacious in the last red light of the sun. At one side it was lighted with the arclights from the spaceport; at the other side, it was already dimly lit with paler lights in a medium pinkish color. At the far end there was a row of shops, and Darkovans and Earthmen were moving about in front of them. The wares displayed were of a bewildering variety: furs, pottery dishes, ornate polished knives with bright sheaths, all kinds of fruits, and what looked like sweets and candies. But as Larry paused to inspect them, his father said in a low voice, "This is just the tourist section-the overflow from the spaceport. I thought you'd rather see the old market. You can come here any time."

They turned into a sidestreet floored with uneven cobblestones, too narrow for any sort of vehicle. His father walked swiftly, as if he knew where he was going, and Larry thought, not without resentment, He's been here before. He knows just where to go. Yet he never realized that I'd want to see all this, too.

The houses on either side were low, constructed of stone for the most part, and seemed very old. They all had a great many windows with thick, translucent, colored or frosted glass set in patterns into the panes, so that nothing could be seen from outside. Between the houses were low stalls made of reeds or wood, and a variety of outbuildings. Larry wondered what the houses were like inside. As he passed one of them, there was a strong smell of roasting meat, and behind one of the houses he heard the voices of children playing. A man rode slowly down the street, mounted on a small brownish horse; Larry realized that he controlled the horse without bit or bridle, with only a halter and the reins.

The narrow street widened and came out into a much larger open space, filled with the low reed stalls canvas tents with many-colored awnings, or small stone kiosks. It was dimly lighted with the flaring enclosed lights. Around the perimeter of the market, horses and carts were tied, and Larry looked at them curiously.

"Horses?"

Montray nodded. "They don't manufacture any surface transport of any sort. We've tried to get them interested in a market for autocars or helicopters, but they say they don't like building roads and nobody is in a hurry anyway. It's a barbarian world, Larry. I told you that. Between ourselves," he lowered his voice, "I think many of the Darkovan people would like some of our kind of machinery and manufacturing. But the people who run things want to keep their world just the way it is. They like it better this way."

Larry was looking around in fascination. He said, "I'd hate to see this market turned into a big mechanized shopping center, though. The ones on Earth are ugly."

His father smiled. "You wouldn't like it if you had to live with it," he

said. "You're like all youngsters you romanticize old-fashioned things. Believe me, the Darkovan authorities aren't romantic. It's just easier for them to go on running things their own way, if they keep the people doing things the way they always have. But it won't last long." He sounded quietly certain. "Once the Terran Empire comes in to show people what a star-travel civilization can be like, people will want progress."

A tall, hard-faced man in a long, wrapped cloak gave them a sharp, angry glance from harsh blue eyes, then lowered thick eyelashes and walked past them. Larry looked up at his father.

"Dad, that man heard what you said, and he didn't like it!"

"Nonsense," his father said. "I wasn't speaking that loud, and very few of them can speak Terran languages. It's all part of the same thing. They trade with us, yet they want nothing to do with our culture." He stopped beside a row of stalls. "Can you see anything you'd like here?"

There was a row of blue-and-white glazed bowls in small and larger sizes, a similar row of green-and-brown ones. At the next stall there were knives and daggers of various sorts, and Larry found himself thinking of the Darkovan boy who had worn a knife in his belt. He picked up one and fingered it idly; at his father's frown, he laughed a little and put it back. What would he do with it? Earthmen didn't wear swords!

An old woman behind a low counter was bending over a huge pottery bowl of steaming, bubbling fat, twisting strips of dough and dropping them into the oil. Below the bowl, the charcoal fire glowed like the red sun, throwing out a welcome heat to where the boy stood. The strips of dough twisted like small goldfish as they turned crisp and brown; as she fished them out, Larry felt suddenly hungry. He had not

spoken Darkovan since that first day, but as he opened his mouth, he found that the learning-tapes had done their work well, for he knew just what he wanted to say, and how.

"What is the price of your cakes, please?"

"Two sekals for each, young sir," she said, and Larry, fishing in his pocket for his spending money, asked for half a dozen. His father put down a scroll at the next stall, and came toward him.

"Those are very good," he said, "I've tasted them. Something like doughnuts."

The old woman was laying out the cakes on a clean coarse cloth, letting the sweet-smelling oil drain from them, dusting them with some pale stuff. She wrapped them in a sheet of brownish fiber and handed the package to Larry.

"Your accent is strange, young sir. Are you from the Cahuenga ranges?" As she raised her lined old face, Larry saw with a shock that the woman's eyes were whitish and unfocused; she was blind. But she had thought his speech genuinely Darkovan! He made a noncommittal reply, paying her for the cakes and biting hungrily into one. They were hot, sweet and crisp, powdered lightly with what tasted like crushed rock candy.

They moved down the twilight lane of booths. Now and again they encountered uniformed men from the spaceport, or occasional civilians, but most of the men, women and children in the market were Darkovans, and they regarded the Terrans, father and son, with faintly hostile curiosity.

Larry thought, Everyone stares at us. I wish I could dress like a Darkovan and mix in with them somehow so they wouldn't take any

notice of me. Then I could know what they were really like. Gloomily he munched the doughnut cake, stopping to look over a display of short knives.

The Darkovan behind the stall said to Larry's father, "Your son is not yet of an age to bear weapons. Or do you Terrans not allow your young men to be men?" His smile was sly, faintly patronizing, and Larry's father frowned and looked irritated.

"Are you about ready to go, Larry?"

"Any time you say, Dad." Larry felt faintly deflated and let down. What, after all, had he been expecting? They turned back, making their way along the row of stalls.

"What did that fellow mean, Dad?"

"On Darkover you'd be legally of age-old enough to wear a sword. And expected to use them to defend yourself, if necessary," Wade Montray said briefly.

Abruptly and with a rush, the red sun sank and went out. Immediately, like sweeping wings, darkness closed over the sky, and thin swirling coils of mist began to blow along the alleys of the market. Larry shivered in his warm coat, and his father pulled up his collar. The lights of the market danced and flickered, surrounded by foggy shapes of color.

"That's why they call the planet Darkover," Larry's father said. Already he was half invisible in the mist. "Stay close to me or you'll get lost in the fog. It will thin out and turn to rain in a few minutes, though."

Through the thick mist, in the flickering lights, a form took shape, coming slowly toward them. At first it looked like a tall man, cloaked

and hooded against the cold; then, with a strange prickling along his spine, Larry realized that the hunched, high-shouldered form beneath the cloak was not human. A pair of green eyes, luminescent as the eyes of a cat by lamplight, knifed in their direction. The nonhuman came slowly on. Larry stood motionless, half-hypnotized held by those piercing eyes, almost unable to move.

"Get back!" Roughly, his father jerked him against the wall Larry stumbled, sprawled, fell, one hand flung out to get his balance. The hand brushed the edge of the alien's cloak-

A stinging, violent pain rocked him back, thrust him, with a harsh blow, against the stone wall. It was like the shock of a naked electric wire. Speechless with pain, Larry picked himself up. The nonhuman, unhurried, was gliding slowly away. Wade Montray's face was dead white in the flickering light.

"Larry! Son, are you hurt?"

Larry rubbed his hand; it was numb and it prickled. "I guess not. What was that thing, anyhow?"

"AKyrri. They have protective electric fields, like some kinds of fish on earth." His father looked somber. "I haven't seen one in a human town for years."

Larry, still numbed, gazed after the dwindling form with respect and strange awe. "One thing's for sure, I won't get in their way again," he said fervently.

The mist was thinning and a fine spray of icy rain was beginning to fall. Not speaking, Wade Montray hurried toward the spaceport; walking fast to keep up-and not minding, because it was freezing cold and the rapid pace kept him warm-Larry wondered why his

father was so silent. Had he simply been afraid? It seemed more than that. Montray did not speak again until they were within their own rooms in Quarters A, the warmth and bright yellow light closing around them like a familiar garment. Larry, laying his coat aside, heard his father sigh.

"Well, does that satisfy your curiosity a little, Larry?"

"Thanks, Dad."

Montray dropped into a chair. "That means no. Well, I suppose you can visit the tourist section and the market by yourself, if you want to. Though you'd better not do too much wandering around alone."

His father dialed himself a hot drink from the dispenser, came back sipping it. Then he said, slowly, "I don't want to tie strings on you, Larry. I'll be honest with you; I wish you hadn't been cursed with that infernal curiosity of yours. I'd like it better if you were like the other kids here-content to stay an Earthman. It would take a load off my mind. But I'm not going to forbid you to explore if you want to. You're old enough, certainly, to know what you want. If you'd been brought up here, you'd be considered a grown man-old enough to wear a sword and fight your own duels."

"How did you know that, Dad?"

His father did not look at him. Facing the wall, he said, "I spent a few years here before you were born. I never should have come back. I knew that. Now I can see--"

He broke off sharply, and without another word, he went off into his own bedroom. Larry did not see him again that night.

IT WAS WORSE that he had thought it would be.

As he came through the doors of the apartment in Quarters A, he saw his father, intercom in hand, and heard Wade Montray's sharp, preoccupied voice, with overtones of trouble.

"-went out after school, and hasn't come in; I checked with all his friends. The guard at the western gate saw him leave, but hasn't seen him come back... I don't want to sound like an alarmist, sir, but if he'd wandered into the Old Town-you know as well as I do what could have happened. Yes, I know that, sir, and I'll take all the responsibility for letting it happen; it was foolish of me. Believe me, I realize that now--"

Larry said hesitantly "Dad-?"

Montray started, half dropping the cap of the intercom.

"Larry! Is that you?"

Montray said into the intercom, "Forget it. He just came in. Yes, I know, I'll attend to it... All right, Larry, come in here where I can get a good look at you."

Larry obeyed, bracing himself for a storm. As he came into the main room, and the light fell on his bruised face, Montray turned pale.

"Larry, your face! Son, what's happened? Are you all right?" He came forward, quickly, taking Larry by the shoulders and turning him toward the light; Larry tensed, trying to pull away.

"It's all right, Dad; I got into a fight. A bunch of toughs. It's all right." He

added quickly, "It looks worse than it is."

Montray's face worked, and for a moment he turned away. When he looked at Larry again, his face was controlled and grim, his voice level. "You'd better tell me about it."

Larry began the story, trying to make light of the roughing up he had had, but his father interrupted, harshly, "You could have been killed! You know that, don't you?"

"I wasn't, though. And really, Dad, it's an incredible piece of luck, meeting Kennard and everything. It was worth a little trouble-Dad, what's wrong, what is it?"

Montray said "I made a mistake ever letting you go into the town alone. I know that, now. That's all over. It could have been very serious. Larry, this is an order: You are not to leave the Terran Zone again-not at any time, not under any conditions."

Startled, outraged, hardly believing, Larry stared at his father. "You can't mean that, Dad!"

"But I do mean it."

"But you haven't even been listening to me, then! Nothing like that would happen again! Kennard said I had the freedom of the city, and his father invited me to come again--"

"I heard you perfectly well," his father cut in "but you've had your orders, Larry, and I don't intend to discuss it any further. You are not to leave the Terran Zone again-at any time. No"-he raised his hand as Larry began to protest--"not another word, not one. Go and wash your face and put something on those cuts and get to bed. Get going!"

Larry opened his mouth and slowly, shut it again. It wasn't the slightest use; his father wasn't listening to him. Fuming, outraged, he stalked toward his room.

It wasn't like Dad to treat him this way-like a little kid to be ordered around! Usually, Dad was reasonable. While he washed his bruised face and painted his skinned knuckles with antiseptic, he stormed silently inside. Dad couldn't mean it-not now, not after the trouble he'd had getting accepted!

Finally he decided to let it ride until morning. Dad had been worried about him; maybe when he'd had a chance to think it over, he'd listen to reason. Larry went to bed, still thinking over, with excitement, the new friend he'd made and the opportunity this opened up-the chance to see the real Darkover, not the world of the spaceport and the tourists but the strange, highly colored world that lay alien and beautiful beyond them.

Dad would have to see it his way!

But he didn't. When Larry tackled him again, over the breakfast table, Montray's face was dark and forbidding, and would have intimidated anyone less determined than Larry.

"I said I didn't even want to discuss it. You've had your orders, and that's all there is to it."

Larry bit his lip, scowling furiously into his plate. Finally, flaming with indignation, he raised his head and stared defiantly at his father.

"I'm not taking that, sir."

Montray frowned again. "What did you say?"

Larry felt a queer, uneasy sensation under his belt. He had never

openly defied his father since he was a toddler of four or five. But he persisted:

"Dad, I don't want to be disrespectful, but you can't treat me that way. I'm not a kid, and when you say something like that, I have a right, at least, to an explanation."

"You'll do as you're told, or else you'll--" Montray checked himself. At last he laid down his fork and leaned forward, his chin on his hands, his eyes angry. But all he said was, "Fair enough then. Here's the story. Suppose, last night, you'd been badly hurt, or killed?"

"But I--"

"Let me finish. One silly kid goes exploring, and it could create an interplanetary incident. If you'd gotten into real trouble, Larry, we would have had to use all the power and prestige of the Terran Empire just to get you out of it again. If we had to do that-especially if we had to use force and Terran weapons-we'd lose all the good will and tolerance that it's taken us years to build up. It would all have to be done over again. Sure, if it came to a fight, we'd win. But we want to avoid incidents, not win fights which cost us more than we gain by winning them. Do you honestly think it's worth it?"

Larry hesitated.

"Well, do you?"

"I suppose not, when you put it that way," Larry said slowly. Mentally he was comparing this with what Kennard had said: how the Darkovans resented the use of the whole power of Terra, just to "pry into" what should be a private quarrel between one troublemaker and the people he had offended. It would also mean that if Larry had been harmed, the Terrans would have held all of Darkover

responsible, not just the few young toughs who had actually committed the incident.

He was trying to think how he could explain this to his father, but Montray left him no time. "That's the situation. No more exploring on your own. And no arguments, if you don't mind; I don't intend to discuss it any further with you. That's just the way it's got to be." He pushed away his plate and stood up. "I've got work to do."

Larry sat on at the empty breakfast table, a dull and simmering resentment burning through him. So Kennard had been right, after all. It seemed that all of Darkover and all of the Terran Empire had to be dragged into it.

His head throbbed and he could hardly see out of his black eye, and his knuckles were so swollen that he found it hard to handle a fork. He decided not to go to school, and spent most of the morning lying on his bed, bitterly resentful. This meant the end of his adventure. What else was there? The dull world of Quarters and spaceport, identical with the world he'd left on Earth. He might as well have stayed there!

He got out the books he had promised Kennard. So he couldn't even keep that promise! And Kennard would think his word wasn't worth anything. How could he get word to his Darkovan friend about the punishment imposed on him? Kennard, and Kennard's father, had shown him friendship and hospitality-and he couldn't even keep his word!

Well, they'd started out by not thinking much of the Terrans-and now their opinion would just be confirmed that Terrans weren't to be trusted.

The day dragged by. The next day he went back to school, turning

aside queries about his black eve with some offhand story of falling over a chair in the darkness. But the day after, as the hour approached when he had promised the Altons to visit them, his conflict grew and grew.

Damn it, he'd promised.

His father, looking into his glowering face at breakfast, had said briefly, "I'm sorry, Larry. This isn't pleasant for me-to deny you something you want so much. Some day, when you're older, perhaps you'll understand why I have to do this. Until then, I'm afraid you'll just have to accept my judgment."

He thinks he'll cut off my interest in Darkover just by forbidding me to go outside the Terran Zone, Larry thought resentfully. He doesn't know anything about it, really-or about me!

The day wore away, slowly. He considered, and rejected, the idea of a final, appeal to his father. Wade Moutray seldom gave an order, but when he did, he never rescinded it, and Larry could tell his father's mind was made up on this subject.

But it wasn't fair-and it wasn't right, or just! Painfully, Larry faced a decision that all youngsters face sooner or later: the knowledge that their parents are not always right-that sometimes they can be dead wrong!

Wrong or not, he thinks I ought to have to obey him anyhow! And that's the bad thing. What else can I do?

He thought that would have to be the end of it, but the question somehow stuck, uncomfortably, with him: Well, what else can I do?

I can refuse to obey him, the thought came suddenly, as if he had never had it before.

He had never deliberately defied his father. The thought made him uncomfortable.

But this time, I'm right and he's wrong, and if he can't see it, I can. I made a commitment, and if I break my word, that in itself is going to make a couple of Darkovans-and important people-think that Terrans aren't worth much.

This is one time where I'm going to have to disobey Dad. Afterward, I'll take any punishment he wants to hand out to me. But I'm not going to break my word to Kennard and his father. I'll explain to them why I may not be able to come again, but I won't insult their hospitality by just disappearing and not even letting them know why I never came back.

Kennard saved me from a mauling-maybe from being killed. I promised him something he wants-some books-and I owe him that much.

He was uneasy about disobeying. But he still felt, deep down, that he was right.

If I'd been born on Darkover, he told himself, I'd be considered a man; old enough to do a man's work, old enough to make my own decisions-and take the consequences. There comes a time in your life when you have to decide for yourself what is right and what is wrong, and stop accepting what older people say. Dad may be right as far as he knows, but he doesn't know the whole story, and I do. And I've got to do what I think is right.

He wondered why he felt so sad about it. It hurt, suddenly, to realize that he'd made a decision he could never go back on. He might be punished like a child, when he got back; but suddenly he understood

that he'd never feel like one again. It wasn't just the act of disobeying his father-any kid could do that. It was that he had decided, once and for all, that he no longer was willing to let his father decide right and wrong for him. If he obeyed his father, after this, it would be because he had thought it over and decided, on a grown-up basis, that he wanted to obey him.

And it hurt. He felt a funny pain about it, but it never occurred to him to change his mind. He'd decided what he was going to do. Now he had to decide how he was going to do it.

His father had mentioned that if he, Larry, got into trouble, it might drag the whole Terran Zone into it. That was something to consider. That was fair enough. Larry wanted to be sure there was no danger of that.

Then he thought:I could be taken for a Darkovan, except for my clothes. I have been mistaken for a Darkovan by my accent. If I'm not dressed as a Terran, then I won't get into any trouble.

And,he added to himself rather grimly,if anything does happen to me, the Terrans won't be dragged into it. It will be my own responsibility.

Quickly, he got out of his own clothes and put on the Darkovan ones Kennard had lent him. He glanced briefly at himself in the mirror. Part of himself recognized, a little ironic awareness, that he was enjoying the masquerade. It was exciting, an adventure. The other half of his awareness was a little grim. By deliberately taking off everything that could identify himself as Terran, he was deliberately giving up his right to the protection of the Empire. Now he was on his own. He'd walk down into the city with no more protection than his two hands and his knowledge of the language could give him.

As if I were really Darkovan born, and entirely on my own!

He had halfway anticipated being stopped at the gate, but he passed through the archway without challenge, and went out into the city.

It was the hour when workmen were returning home, and the streets were crowded. He walked through them without attracting a glance, a strange breathless excitement growing under his ribs, and bursting in him. With every step, he seemed somehow to leave the person he had been, further behind. It was as if his present dress was not a masquerade, but rather as if he had simply discovered a deeper layer of himself, and was living with it. The pale cold sun hung high in the sky, casting purple shadows across the narrow streets and alleys; he found his way through the outlying reaches of the city with the instinct of a cat. He was almost sorry when he finally reached the distant quarter where the house of the Altons lay.

The nonhuman he had seen before opened the door for him, but Kennard was standing in the hallway, and Larry wondered briefly if the Darkovan boy had been waiting for him.

"You did make it," Kennard said, with a grin of satisfaction. "Somehow I'd had the feeling you wouldn't be able to, but when I looked this afternoon, I realized you would."

The words were confusing; Larry tried to make sense of them, finally deciding that they must be some Darkovan idiom he didn't understand too well. He said, "I thought, for a while, that I couldn't come," but he left it at that.

The nonhuman moved toward him, and Larry flinched and drew away involuntarily, remembering his encounter with one in the streets. Kennard said quickly, "Don't be afraid of thekyrri. It's true that if strangers brush against them they give off sparks, but he won't hurt you now he knows you. They've been servants to our families for

generations."

Larry allowed the nonhuman to take his cloak, looking curiously at the creature. It was erect and vaguely manlike, but covered with a pelt of long grayish fur, and it had long prehensile fingers and a face like a masked monkey. He wondered where thekyrri came from and what sort of curious relationships could exist between human and nonhuman. Would he ever know?

"I brought you the books I promised," he told Kennard, and the other boy took them eagerly. "Oh, good! But I'll look at them later. We needn't stand here in the hall. Do you know how to play darts? Shall we have a game?"

Larry agreed with interest. Kennard showed him the game in a big downstairs room, wide and light, with translucent walls, evidently a gameroom of some sort. The darts were light and perfectly balanced, feathered with crimson and green feathers from some exotic bird. Once Larry grew accustomed to their weight and balance, he found that they were well matched in the game. But they played it desultorily. Kennard breaking off now and again to leaf through the books, stare fascinated at the many photographs, and ask endless questions about star-travel.

They were in one such lull in the game when the curtained panels closing off the room swirled back and Valdir Alton came in followed by another man—a tall Darkovan, with copper hair sweeping back from a high stern forehead marked with two wings of white hair. He wore an embroidered cloak of a curious cut. The boys broke off in their game, and Kennard with a start of surprise, made the stranger a deep and formal bow. The newcomer glanced sharply at Larry, and, not wishing to seem rude, Larry repeated the gesture.

The man spoke some offhand phrase of polite acknowledgment,

nodding pleasantly to both boys; but as his gray gaze crossed Larry's, he started, narrowed his brows, then, turning his head to Valdir, said, "Terran?"

Valdir did not speak, but they looked at one another for a moment. The stranger nodded, crossed the room and stood in front of Larry. Slowly, as if compelled, Larry looked up at him, unable to draw his eyes away from his intense and compelling stare. He felt as if he were being weighed in the balance, sorted out, drawn out; as if the old man's searching look went down beneath his borrowed clothes, down to the alien bones under his flesh, down to his deepest thoughts and memories. It was like being hypnotized. He found himself suddenly shivering, and then, suddenly, he could look away again, and the man was smiling down at him, and the strange gray eyes were kind.

He said to Valdir, speaking past the boys, "So this is why you brought me here, Valdir? Don't worry I have sons of my own. Introduce me to your friend, Kennard."

Kennard said "The lord Lorill Hastur, one of the Elders of the Council."

Larry had heard the name from his father, spoken with exasperation but a certain degree of respect. He thought, I hope my being here doesn't mean trouble, after all, and for a brief instant almost regretted coming; then let it pass. The tension in the room slackened indefinitely. Valdir picked up one of the books Larry had brought Kennard, turning the pages with interest; Lorill Hastur came and looked over his shoulder, then turned away and began examining the darts. He drew back his arm and tossed one accurately into the target. Valdir put the book down and looked up at Larry.

"I was sure that you would be able to come today."

"I wanted to. But I may not be able to come again," Larry said.

Valdir's eyes were narrowed, curious: "Too dangerous?"

"No," said Larry, "that doesn't bother me. It's that my father would rather I didn't." He stopped; he didn't want to discuss his father, or seem to complain about his father's unreasonableness. That was something between his father and himself, not to be shared with outsiders. The conflict touched him again with sadness. He liked Kennard so much better than any of the friends he had made in Quarters, and yet this friendship must be given up almost before it had a chance to be explored. He took up one of the darts and turned it, end for end, in his hand; then flung it at the target board, missing his aim. Lorill Hastur turned and faced him again.

"How is it that you were willing to risk trouble and even punishment to come today, Larry?"

It did not occur to Larry to wonder-not until much later-how the Elder had known his name, or the inner conflict that had forced a choice on him. Just then it seemed natural that this old man with the searching eyes knew everything about him. But he still wasn't ready to sound disloyal.

"I didn't have a chance to make him understand. He would have realized why I had to come."

"And breaking your word would have been an insult," Lorill Hastur said gravely. "It is part of the code of a man to make his own choices."

He smiled at the boys, and turned, without formal leave-taking. Valdir took a step to follow him, turned back to Larry.

"You are welcome here at any time."

"Thank you, sir. But I'm afraid I won't be able to come again. Not that I wouldn't like to."

Valdir smiled. "I respect your choice. But I have a feeling we'll meet again." He followed Lorill Hastur out of the room.

Alone with Kennard, Larry found room for wonder. "How did he know so much about me?"

"The Hastur-Lord? He's a telepath, of course. What else?" Kennard said, matter-of-factly, his face buried in a book of views taken in deep space. "What sort of camera do they use for this? I never have been able to understand how a camera works."

And Larry, explaining the principle of sensitized film to Kennard, felt an amused, ironic surprise. Telepath, of course! And to Kennard this was the commonplace and something like a camera was exotic and strange. It was all in the point of view.

Far too soon, the declining sun told him it was time to go. He refused Kennard's urgings to stay longer. He did not want his father to be frightened at his absence. Also, at the back of his mind, was a memory like a threat-if he was missing, might his father set the machinery of the Terran Empire into motion to locate him, bring down trouble on his friends? Kennard went a little way with him, and at the corner of the street paused, looking at him rather sadly.

"I don't like to say goodbye, Larry," he said. "I like you. I wish--"

Larry nodded, a little embarrassed, but sharing the emotion. "Maybe we'll see each other again," he said, and held out his hand. Kennard hesitated, long enough for Larry to feel first offended, then worried for fear he had committed some breach of Darkovan manners; then,

deliberately, the Darkovan boy reached both hands and took Larry's between them. Larry did not know for years how rare a gesture this was in the Darkovan caste to which the Altons belonged. Kennard said softly, "I won't say good-bye. Just-good luck."

He turned swiftly and walked away without looking back.

Larry turned his steps toward home, in the lowering mist. As he moved between the dark canyons of the streets, his feet steadying themselves automatically on the uneven stones, he felt a flat undefined sorrow, as if he were seeing all this with the poignancy of a farewell. It was as if life had opened a bright door, and then slammed it again, leaving the world duller by contrast.

Suddenly, his feeling of sadness thinned out and vanished. This was only a temporary thing. He wouldn't be a kid forever. The time would come when he'd be free and on his own, free to explore all the worlds of his own choosing-and Darkover was only one of many. He had tasted a man's freedom today-and some day it would be his for all time.

His head went up and he crossed the square toward the spaceport, steadily. He'd had his fun, and he could take whatever happened. It had been worth it.

He had the curious sense that he was re-living something that had happened before, as he entered their apartment in the Quarters building. His father was waiting for him, his face drawn, unreadable.

"Where have you been?"

"In the city. At the home of Kennard Alton."

Montray's face contracted with anger, but his voice was level and stern.

"You do remember that I forbade you to leave the Terran Zone? You're not going to tell me that you forgot?"

"I didn't forget."

"In other words, you deliberately disobeyed."

Larry said quietly, "Yes."

Montray was evidently holding his anger in check with some effort. "Precisely why, when I did forbid it?"

Larry paused a moment before answering. Was he simply making excuses about having done what he wanted to do? Then he was sure, again, of the rightness of his position.

"Because, Dad, I'd made a promise and I didn't feel it was right to break it, without a better reason than just that you'd forbidden it. This was something I had to do, and you were treating me like a kid. I tried to make sure that you wouldn't be involved, or the Terran Empire, if anything had happened to me."

His father said, at last, "And you felt you should make that decision for yourself. Very well, Larry, I admire your honesty. Just the same, I refuse to concede that you have a right to ignore my orders on principle. You know I don't like punishing you. However, for the present you will consider yourself under house arrest-not to leave our quarters except to go to school, under any pretext." He paused and a bleak smile touched his lips. "Will you obey me, or shall I inform the guards not to let you pass without reporting it?"

Larry flinched at the severity of the punishment, but it was just. From his father's point of view, it was the only thing he could do. He nodded, not looking up.

"Anything you say, Dad. You've got my word."

Montray said, without sarcasm, "You have shown me that it means something to you. I'll trust you. House arrest until I decide you can be trusted with your freedom again."

The next days dragged slowly by, no day distinguishing itself from the last. The bruises on his face and hands healed, and his Darkovan adventure began to seem dim and pallid, as if it had happened a long time ago. Nevertheless, even in the dullness of his punishment, which deprived him even of things he had previously not valued-freedom to go about the spaceport and the Terran city, to visit friends and shops-he never doubted that he had done the right thing. He chafed under the restriction, but did not really regret having earned it.

Ten days had gone by, and he was beginning to wonder a little when his father would see fit to lift the sentence, when the order came from the Commandant.

His father had just come in, one evening, when the intercom buzzed, and when Montray put the phone down, he looked angry and apprehensive.

"Your idiotic prank is probably coming home to roost," he said angrily. "That was the Legate's office in Administration. You and I have both been ordered to report there this evening-and it was a priority summons."

"Dad, if it means trouble for you, I'm sorry. You'll have to tell them you forbade me to go-and if you don't, I will. I'll take all the blame myself." For the first time, Larry felt that the consequences might really go beyond himself. But that's not my fault-it's because the administration is unreasonable. Why should Dad be blamed for what I did?

He had never been in the administration building before, and as he approached the great white skyscraper that loomed over the whole spaceport complex, he was intrigued to the point of forgetting that he was here for a reproof. The immense building, glimmering with white metal and glass, the wide halls and the panoramic view from each corridor window of the Darkovan city below and the mountains beyond, almost took his breath away. The Legate's office was high up, bright and filled with lowering red sunshine; for a moment, as he stepped into the brilliant glassed-in room, a curious thought flashed through Larry's mind: He sees more of this world than he wants anyone to know about.

The Legate was a stocky man, dark and grizzled, with thoughtful eyes and a permanent frown. Nevertheless he had dignity, and something which made Larry think quickly of Lorill Hastur. What is it? Is it just that they're used to power, or to making decisions that other people have to live with?

"Commander Reade-my son Larry."

"Sit down." It was a peremptory command, not an invitation. "So you've been roaming around in the city? Tell me about it-tell me everything you've done there."

His face was unreadable; without anger, but without friendliness. Reserving judgment. Neither kind nor unkind. But there was immense authority in it, as if he expected Larry to jump at once to obey him; and after ten days of sulking in Quarters, Larry wasn't feeling especially humble.

"I didn't know it was against any rules, sir. And I didn't hurt anyone, and nothing happened to me."

Reade made a noncommittal sound. "Suppose you let me decide about that. Just tell me about it."

Larry told the whole story: his wanderings in the city day after day, his meeting with the gang of toughs, and the intervention of Kennard Alton. Finally he told of his last visit to the Alton house, making it clear that he had gone without his father's knowledge and consent. "So don't blame Dad, sir. He didn't break any laws, at least."

Montray said quickly, "Just the same, Reade, I'll take the responsibility. He's my son, and I'll be responsible for his not doing it again."

Reade gestured him to silence. "That's not the problem. We've heard from the Council-on behalf of the Altons. It seems that they are deeply and gravely offended."

"What? Why?"

"Because you have refused your son permission to pursue this friendship-they say you have insulted them, as if they were unfit to

associate with your son."

Montray put his hands to his temples, wearily. He said, "Oh, my God."

"Exactly," Reade said in a soft voice. "The Altons are important people on Darkover-aristocrats, members of the Council. A snub or slight from a Terran can create trouble."

Suddenly his voice exploded in wrath. "Confound the boy anyhow! We aren't ready for this sort of episode. We should have thought of it ourselves and made preparation for it, and now when it hits us, we can hardly make good use of it! How old is the boy?"

Montray gestured at Larry to answer for himself, and Reade grunted. "Sixteen, huh? Here, they're men at that age-and we ought to realize it! What about it, young Larry? Are you intending-have you ever considered going into the Empire service?"

Puzzled by the question, Larry said, "I've always intended that, Commander."

"Well, here's your chance." He tossed a small squarish slip of paper across the table. It was thick and bordered, and had Darkovan writing on it, the straight squarish script of the city language. He said, "I understand you can read some of this stuff. God knows why you bothered, but it makes it handy for us. Figure it out later when you get the chance; as it happens, I can read it too, though most people in Administration don't bother. It's an invitation from the Altons-coming through Administration as a slap in the face: they don't like the way Terrans tend to go through channels on every little thing-for you, Larry, to spend the next season at their country estate, with Kennard."

Montray's face went dark as if a shutter had dropped over his eyes. "Impossible, Reade. I know what you have in mind, and I won't go along with it."

Reade's face did not change. "You see the position this puts us in. The boy's not prepared for the tremendous opportunity this opens up, but we've still got to grab this chance. We simply can't afford to let Larry refuse this invitation. For God's sake, do you realize that we've been trying to get permission for someone to visit the outlying estates, for fifteen years? It's the first time in years that any Terran has had this chance, and if we turn it down, it may be years before it comes again."

Montray's mouth twisted. "Oh, there have been a few."

"Yes, I know." Reade did not elaborate, but turned to Larry. "Do you understand why you're going to have to accept this invitation?"

Suddenly, with the visual force of a hallucination, Larry saw again the tall figure of Valdir Alton and heard him say, as clearly as if he had been in that white Terran room with them, I have a feeling we'll see you again before long. It was so real that he shook his head to clear it of the abnormally intense impression.

Reade persisted. "You are going to accept?"

Larry felt a delayed surge of excitement. To see Darkover—not only the city, but far outside the Terran Zone entirely, the real world, untouched by Terra! The thought was a little frightening and yet wildly exciting. But a tinge of caution remained and he said warily, "Would you mind telling me why you are so eager to have me, sir? I understood that the Terrans were afraid of any fraternization with Darkovans."

"Afraid of it causing trouble," Reade said. "We've been trying to arrange something like this, though, for years. I suppose they felt we were a little too eager, and were afraid we'd try something. Larry, I can explain it very easily. First of all, we don't want to offend Darkovan aristocrats. But more than that. This is the first time that Darkovans of power and position have actually made an advance of personal friendliness to any Terran. They trade with us, they accept us here, but they don't want to have anything to do with us personally. This is like a breach in that wall. You have a unique opportunity to be a sort of ambassador for Terra. Perhaps, to show them that we aren't anything to fear. And then, too--" He hesitated. "Very few Terrans have ever seen anything of this planet except what the Darkovans wanted us to see. You should keep very careful records of everything you see, because something you don't even realize is important might mean everything to us."

Larry saw through that at once.

"Are you asking me to spy on my friends?" he asked, in outrage.

"No, no," Reade said quickly, even though Larry felt very clearly that Reade was thinking that he was a little too clever. "Just to keep your eyes open and tell us what you see. Chances are they will be expecting you to do that anyhow."

Montray interrupted, pacing the floor restlessly, "I don't like having my son used as a pawn in power politics. Not by Darkovans trying to get next to us-and not by the Terran Empire trying to find out about Darkover, either!"

"You're exaggerating, Montray. Look, at least a few of the higher Darkovan caste may be telepaths; we couldn't plant the kid on them as a spy, even if we tried. It's just a chance to know a little more about them."

He appealed directly to Larry: "You say you liked this Darkovan youngster. Doesn't it make sense-to try and build friendly relations between the two of you?"

That thought had already crossed Larry's mind. He nodded. Montray said reluctantly, "I still don't like it. But there's nothing I can do."

Reade looked at him and Larry was shocked at the quick expression of triumph and power in the man's face. He thought, He enjoys this. He wondered, suddenly, why he could see into the man this way. He was sure he knew more about Commander Reade than Reade wanted him to know. Reade said softly over Larry's head to Wade Montray, "We've got to do it this way. Your son is old enough, and he's not scared-are you, Larry? So all we have to do is tell the Altons that he'll be proud and honored to visit them-and say when."

Back again in their own apartment in Quarters A, Larry's father swore under his breath, ceaselessly, for almost a quarter of an hour. "And now you see what you've gotten yourself into," he finished at last, viciously. "Larry, I don't like it, I don't like it, I don'tlike it! And damn it, I suppose you're overjoyed-you've got what you want!"

Larry said, honestly, "It's interesting, Dad. But I am a little scared. Reade wants me to go for all the wrong reasons."

"I'm glad you can seethat, at least," Montray snapped. "I ought to let you hang yourself. You got yourself into this. Just the same--" He grew silent; then he got up and came to his son, and took Larry by the shoulders again, looking very searchingly at him. His voice was gentler than Larry could remember hearing it in years.

"Listen, son. If you really don't want to get into this, I'll get you out of it, somehow. You're my son, not just a potential Empire employee. They can't force you to go. Don't worry about their putting pressure on me-I

can always put in for a transfer somewhere else. I'll leave the damned planet before I let them force you to play their games!"

Larry, feeling his father's hands on his shoulders, suddenly realized that he was being given a chance-perhaps the last chance he would ever have-to return to the old, protected status of a child. He could be his father's son again, and Dad would get him out of this. So the step he had taken, in declaring himself a man, was not quite irrevocable after all. He could return to the safe age, and the price was very small. His father would take care of him.

He found himself wanting to, almost desperately. He'd bitten off more than he could chew, and this was his chance to get out of it. The alternative would put him, on his own, in a strange world; playing a strange part, representing his Terran world all alone.

And the Altons would know that his man's decision had been a lie, that he clung to the safety of being a Terran child hiding behind his society-

He drew a long breath, and put his hands up over his father's.

"Thanks, Dad," he said, warmly, meaning it. "I almost wish I could take you up on that. Honestly. But I have to go. As you say, I got myself into this, and I might as well get some good out of it-for all of you. Don't worry, Dad-it's going to be all right."

Montray's hands tightened on his shoulders. His eyes met his son's, and he said, "I was afraid you'd feel that way, Larry-and I wish you didn't. But I guess, being who you are, you'd have to. I could still forbid you, I guess"-a wry smile flitted across his face--"but I've found out you're too old for that, and I won't even try." He dropped his hands, but then a wide grin spread across his worried face.

"Damn it, son-I still don't like it-but I'm proud of you."

THEY HAD mounted again, and had ridden for an hour, when they came to a narrow canyon between two forested hills. Between the slopes and the dark trees the place lay in shadow, for the sun was declining; Valdir, riding ahead, slowed his horse to a walk and waited for the others to come up with him.

Kennard's eyes rested questioningly on his father, and Larry, riding beside him, could follow his thoughts in that way that was still so strange to him: I don't like this place. Every clump of brushwood could have a dozen bandits behind it. It's a perfect set-up for an ambush... It would be my first fight. The first time I've been this close to real danger, not just lolling around the city streets chasing home troublemakers. I wonder if Father knows that I'm afraid.

Larry's skin prickled, in a strange mixture of excitement and fear. Within the last three days his peaceful life had suddenly plunged into a maelstrom of violence and danger. It was new to him, but, somehow, not unpleasant.

They were halfway down the little valley when Larry heard, through the hoofbeats, a curious sound from deep within the bushes. He stiffened in the saddle; Valdir, alert, saw the move and reined in, looking warily around. Then, from the shelter of the trees came a harsh and raucous cry-and then mounted men were all sweeping down on them.

Valdir cried out a warning. Larry, in that first instant of petrified shock, saw the riders, tall men in long furred cloaks, long-haired and bearded, mounted on huge rangy horses of a strange breed, racing down on them at incredible speed. There was no time to flee, no time to think. Suddenly he was in the middle of the attackers, saw the

Darkovans had drawn their swords; Kennard, his face very white, had his dagger in his hand and was fighting to control his horse with the other.

He had a bare moment to see all this-and a strange, uprushing sense of panic that he, of all his party, was unarmed and knew nothing of fighting-before it all melted into a mad confusion of horses pushing against horses, cries in a strange tongue, the dull clash of steel on steel.

Larry's horse reared upright and plunged forward. He gripped wildly at the reins, felt them slide through his fingers, burning his blistered hands with a brief stab of pain. Then he felt himself losing his balance and slid to the ground, legs crumpling beneath him. Half stunned, he had just sense enough to roll from beneath the pawing hooves of his frantic horse. Someone tripped over his prostrate body, stumbled, fell forward on the grass; roused up with a hoarse cry of rage, and a moment later came at Larry with a knife. Larry rolled over on his back, balling up, kicking with one booted foot at the descending knife. With a split-second sense of weird unreality-This isn't real, it can't be!-he saw the knife spin away in a high arc and fall ten feet away. The man, knocked off balance, reeled and staggered back; recovered himself and dived at Larry, getting hold of him with both hands. Larry drew his elbows up, pushed with all his might and freed himself momentarily. He struggled up to his knees, but his attacker was on him again and the man's face-rough, bearded, with evil yellow eyes-came close and menacing. His breath stank hot in Larry's face; his hands sought for Larry's throat. Larry, frightened and yet suddenly cool-headed, found himself thinking, He hasn't got a knife, and he's fat and out of condition .

He went limp, relaxing and falling backward, dragging the man with him, before his attacker could recover his balance, Larry drew up his feet to his chest in an almost convulsive movement: thrust out with all

his strength. The kick landed in the man's stomach. The bandit gave a yell of agony and crumpled, howling, his hands gripping his belly in oblivious anguish.

Larry pulled himself up to his knees again, braced himself, and put the whole weight of his body into one punch, which struck the man fairly in the nose.

The man dropped, out cold, and lay still.

And as Larry straightened, recovering his balance, finding a moment to feel fright again, something struck him hard on the back of the head.

The clashing of swords and knives became a thunder, an explosion-then slid into a deathly, unreal silence. He felt himself falling. But he never felt himself strike the ground.

It was dark. He was sore and cramped; his whole body ached, and there was a throbbing, jolting pain in his head. He tried to move, made a hoarse sound, and opened his eyes.

He could see nothing. He knew a split-second of panic; then he began to see, dimly, through the coarse weave of cloth over his face. He tried to move his hands and felt that they were bound with cords at his side. The jolting pain went on. It felt like hoofbeats. It was hoofbeats. He was lying on his stomach, bent in the middle, and against his hands was the hairy warmth of a horse's body.

He realized, fuzzily, that he was blindfolded and flung doubled over the saddle of a horse. With the realization, he panicked and struggled to move his arms, and then felt a sharp steel point, pricking through his clothes, against his ribs.

"Lie still," said a harsh voice, in so barbarous a dialect that Larry could barely understand the words. "I know that orders are not to kill you, but you'd be none the worse for a little bloodletting-and much easier to carry! Lie still!"

Larry subsided, his head spinning. Where was he? What had happened? Where were Valdir, Kennard? Memory of the fight came rushing back. They had been outnumbered. Had the others, too, been taken prisoner? How long had he been unconscious? Where were they taking him? Cold fear gripped the boy; he was in the hands of Darkovan bandits, and he was alone and far from his own people, on a strange world whose people were hostile to Terra.

What would they do to him?

The jolting hoofbeats went on for what seemed hours before they slowed, stopped, and Larry was pulled roughly to the ground.

"A good prize," said a voice, speaking the same harsh and barbarous dialect, "and earnest for good behavior from those sons of Zandru. The heir to Alton, no less-see the colors he wears?"

"I thought Alton's son was older than this," said another voice.

"He's small for his years," said the first voice, contemptuously, "but he bears the mark of the Comyn -hair of flame, and no commoner ever wore such clothes, or rode one of the Alton-bred horses."

"Except when we come back from a raid," guffawed another voice.

Larry went cold with fright. Was Kennard a prisoner too?

Rough hands pulled Larry forward again; the folds of muffling cloth were jerked away from his face, and someone pushed him forward. It was twilight, and it was raining a little, thin fine cold drops that made him shiver. He blinked, wishing he could get his bound hands to his head, and looked around.

They stood in the shadow of an ancient, ruined building, sharp-edged stones rising high around them. An icy wind was blowing. Larry's captor shoved him forward.

There were a good dozen of the roughnecks in the lee of the ruin, but he saw no sign of Kennard, Valdir, or of any of his companions.

Before him stood a tall, strong man, cloaked in a soiled crimson mantle, much cut and torn. Under it was a dark leather vest and breeches which had once been finely cut and embroidered. The hood of the mantle was pushed back but the man's face was invisible; a soft leather mask, cut to lie close to nose and cheeks,

concealed all his features to the thin, cruel lips. He had six fingers on each hand. His voice was rough and husky, but he spoke the city dialect without the barbarous accent of the others.

"You are Kennard Alton-Comyn, son of Valdir?"

Larry looked around in dismay, but no one else was visible, and suddenly his mind flashed across the mistake they had made.

They thought he was Kennard Alton-they had taken him as a hostage-and he dared not even tell them they had made a mistake! What would they do to one of the alien Terrans?

The man's words returned to him-An earnest of good behavior... the heir to Alton! That sounded as if they didn't want to kill him-not right away, at least. But how could he keep them from discovering his Terran identity? What would Kennard do?

The masked man repeated his question, harshly. Larry let out his breath, slowly and tensely. What would Kennard do-or say?

He thought of Kennard's arrogance, facing the street roughnecks a few weeks ago. He drew himself to his full height and said, clearly, slowly because he was searching for the right words and colloquial phrases, but it gave an effect of dignity, "Is it not courtesy in your land to declare the host's name before asking the name of a-a guest?"

He knew he was playing for his life. He had watched the arrogance of the Darkovan aristocrats, and he sensed that their contempt for these bandits was as great as their hatred for them. He shrugged his cloak around his shoulders-thank God he had been wearing Darkovan clothes!-and stood unflinching before the man's masked stare.

"As you wish," the masked man said, his lips curling, "yet build no

hope on courtesy, son of the Hali-imyn . I am called Cyrillon of the Forest Roads-and you are Kennard N'Caldir Alton-Comyn."

Larry said, "Would it profit anything to deny it?"

"Very little." Behind the mask, Larry felt Cyrillon's eyes sharp on him.

"What do you want with me?"

"Not your death, unless"-the cruel lips hardened--"you make it necessary. A pawn you are, son of Alton, and of value to us, but a time could come-never doubt it-where your death would be wiser than your life in our hands. So don't build too heavily on your safety, chiyu , or think that you can make whatever move you please and that we won't dare to kill you for it."

He regarded Larry for a long moment, with eyes so grim that Larry flinched. He was cold with terror; he felt like breaking down, shrieking out the mistake they were making.

At last Cyrillon released his eyes. "We have a long way to ride, in rough country. You will come with us, or be carried like a bundle of blankets. But on the roads we will travel, men need their limbs, their wits, and the use of their eyes. The passes are not easy even for free men. If I leave you free, and give you the use of all three, will you pledge me your honor ascomyn to make no attempt to escape?"

It occurred to Larry that a promise made under threats was no honorable promise, and involved nothing. He would, doubtless, save himself a lot of trouble by giving his parole. He wavered a moment; then, clearly as sight, he seemed to see the face of Kennard-stern, with boyish pride and the severe Darkovan concept of honor. Could a Terran do anything less? That pride stiffened his voice as he resolved to play his part.

"A pledge of honor to a thief and an outlaw? A man who"-again his thoughts raced, remembering stories Valdir had told about the codes of battle--"a man who carries away his enemy's son muffed in a cloak, rather than cutting him down openly in fair fight?"

He hesitated, then the words came to him, almost as if he heard Valdir's self speak them. "You who break laws of the road and the laws of war have no right to exchange words of honor with honorable men. I will speak to you as an equal only with the sword. Since you are without honor, I will not soil even my bare word. If you want me to go anywhere, you will have to take me by force, because I will not willingly go one step in the company of renegades and outlaws!"

Breathless he fell silent. Cyrillon regarded him in deadly silence, his lips set and menacing, for so long that Larry quailed, and it was all he could do to keep his face impassive. Why had he burst out like that? What nonsensical impulse to play the part of an Alton had impelled those words? They had rushed out without his conscious control; without even a second thought! It might have been wiser not to enrage the outlaw.

And enrage him he had; Cyrillon's odd hands were clenched on his knifehilt till the knuckles stood out, white and round; but he spoke quietly.

"Fine words, my boy. See, then, that you do not whimper at their results. Tie him, Kyro, and make a good job of it this time," he said to someone behind Larry.

The man cut the cords on Larry's wrists, then pulled his hands forward. He tied them together with a thick wool scarf which he took from his own throat; then the wool padding was crossed with tight leather thongs which, without the padding, would have bitten deep into his flesh. They left his feet free, but passed a rope about his

waist, securing it by a long loop to the saddle of his captor. Then the man took water and wet the leather knots. Cyrillon watched these proceedings grimly and, at last, said, "I speak these orders in your presence, Alton, so that you will know what to expect. I do not want you killed; you are more useful to me alive. Just the same, Kyro, if he tries to run from the path, cut the sinew in one of his legs. If he tries to drag and hamper our climbing, once we get on the mountain, cut his throat right away. And if he makes any disturbance whatsoever as we go along the Devil's Shelf, cut the rope and let him drop down into the abyss, and good riddance to him."

Larry felt his heart suck and turn over; but although his cheeks blanched, his eyes did not falter, and, at last, Cyrillon said, "Good. We understand one another." He turned to mount, and Larry, somehow, sensed that he was disappointed.

He wanted me to be frightened and plead with him. He would get some kind of satisfaction out of seeing an Alton pleading-with him! How did I know that?

The man who had him captive lifted Larry to the back of his horse.

"For the moment we can ride," he said, grimly. He looked ill-pleased. "Don't give me any trouble, lad; I have no stomach for torturing even a whelp of the Hali-imyn. Never doubt he means what he says, either."

The other bandits were mounting. Larry, stiff and cold and frightened, looked up at the high wall of mountains that rose ahead.

And yet, for all his fear, a curious and unquenchable pulse of excitement and curiosity beat within him. He had wanted to see the strange and exciting life of the alien world-and here at the foot of the strange mountains, under a strange sun, he was seeing it undiluted.

Even with Kennard, there had been the sense that somehow everything was a little different, because he was Terran, because he was alien.

He realized that he had really no grounds for even the slight optimism he felt. For all he knew, Valdir and Kennard, and all their companions, might be lying dead in the valley where they had been ambushed. He was being taken-alone, unarmed, a prisoner, an alien-into some of the wildest and most dangerous and impassable country on Darkover.

Yet the indefinite lift of optimism remained. He was alive and unhurt-and almost anything could happen next.

DAY FOLLOWED slow day, in the room where Larry was imprisoned; gradually, his original optimism dimmed out and faded. He was here, and there was no way to tell whether or not he would ever leave the place. He now knew he was being held as a hostage against Valdir Alton. From scraps of information he had wormed out of his jailer, he had put together the situation. Cyrillon and others of his kind had preyed on the lower lands since time out of mind. Valdir had been the first to organize the lowlanders in resistance, to build the Ranger stations which warned of impending raids, and this struck Cyrillon, unreasonably enough, as unfair. It ran clear against the time-honored Darkovan code, that each man shall defend his own belongings. By holding Valdir's son prisoner, he hoped to stalemate this move, and ward off retaliations.

But they didnot have Valdir's son; and sooner or later, Larry supposed, Cyrillon would find it out. He didn't like to think what would happen then.

As the fourth day was darkening into night, he heard sounds in the distance; feet hurrying in the corridors, horses' hooves trampling in the courtyard, men calling to one another in command. He looked up, in frustration at the high window which prevented him from seeing out; then dragged a heavy bench toward the window and clambered up on it. He could just see over the broad, high sill, and down into the courtyard below.

Nearly two dozen men were milling around below, leading out and saddling horses, choosing weapons from a great pile in the corner of the bricked-in courtyard. Larry saw Cyrillon's form, tall and lean, striding through the men; here pausing to speak to one, here inspecting a saddle-girth, here lashing out, swift as a striking snake,

to knock a man head-over-heels with a swift fist. The great gate was swinging open, the mounted men forming to ride through.

Was the castle empty, then? Unguarded? Larry looked down to the courtyard, in frustration. He was at least thirty feet above the bricks; a thirty-foot fall might not kill him if he landed on grass, but on stone... ? The castle wall was smooth below him for at least ten feet; with the use of both hands, he might well have managed a foothold on the ledge below. With one hand tied behind his back, he might as well have tried to walk a tightrope to the nearest mountain peak.

He let himself slide down to the floor again. Doubtless they had left someone here... possibly only the feeble old man who brought Larry's food.

If he had a weapon...

They had left him his pocketknife; but the main blade was broken, and the magnetized blade remaining was less than two inches long. The furniture in the room was all old and too heavy to be broken up for a club of any sort. If he could somehow manage to club the man over the head when next he came in... .

There seemed nothing from which he could improvise even a simple weapon. With both hands, he might have thrown his jacket at the old man and managed to smother him with it. They seemed to be guarding against the Comyn telepathic tricks, but they had not tried to guard against ordinary attack... and yet there was nothing in the room that could be used as a weapon.

He sat, scowling, considering, for a long time. If he could have smashed the window, perhaps a long splinter of glass might serve.

He heard shuffling footsteps down the hall, and a thought-almost too

late!-occurred to him. He dropped to the floor and, with his one free hand, fumbled to unlace his boot. It was heavy, a Darkovan riding-boot, and if it struck the man on the back of the head-

But it was slow work with one hand and before he had it off, a key moved in the lock, the door came open in one burst, as if the man had stood back and licked it open without coming inside. Then the man appeared in the door. He had a tray with food balanced in one hand; the other held a long, wicked-looking riding whip. He held it poised to strike, saying in his barbarous dialect, "None of your tricks, boy!"

Larry jerked off the boot, clumsily with his right hand, and hurled it at the man's head.

As soon as he had thrown it, he knew that the throw, with the wrong hand, would go wild: he saw the old man start slightly, the dishes on the tray clashing together. The whip, as if with a life of its own, flicked out and wrapped round Larry's free wrist with a stinging slap; the man jerked the whip free, laughing harshly.

"I thought you might have some such little trick," he jeered, raised the whip again and brought it down, not very hard, across Larry's shoulders. Tears started to Larry's eyes, but really it was more of a warning than a blow-for Larry knew that a blow with such a whip, given seriously, would cut through his clothes and an inch into the flesh.

"Want some more?" the man asked, with a grin.

Furious with frustration, Larry bent his eyes on the ground.

The man said good-naturedly, "Eat your dinner, lad. You don't try any tricks and I won't hurt you-agreed? No reason we can't get along very

nicely while the Master is away-is there?"

When the man had gone, Larry turned dispiritedly to the tray. He didn't feel like eating; yet he had eaten so little in the last four days that he was tormented with hunger. The final ignominy was that he couldn't even get his boot on with one hand. He took the dishes off the tray, listlessly. Then he raised his eyebrows; instead of the usual dried meat strips and coarse bread, there was some sort of grilled fish smoking hot and a cup of the same chocolate-like drink he had had in the Trade City.

Awkwardly, with his free hand, but hungrily, he gobbled down the fish, even gnawing on the bones. It was an unfamiliar fish and had a strange tang, but he was too hungry to be particular. He leaned back, sipping the drink slowly. He wondered about the change. Perhaps Cyrillon—who obviously was somewhat afraid of him since the episode with the crystal—considered him valuable as a hostage and, seeing the coarser food left uneaten, had decided he had to feed him better, and keep him in good health and good spirits.

The light from the high window crept across the floor. The shadows were pale purple, the light pink and sparkling. Strange motes danced in the pink beam.

Larry, feeling full and comfortably sleepy, leaned back, watching the motes. He realized suddenly that on each of the motes a tiny man rode, pink and purple and carrying an infinitesimal spear that looked like a fiber of saffron. Fascinated, incurious, he watched the tiny men slide down the sunbeam and mass on the floor. They formed into regiments, and still they kept sliding down the beam of pink light, until their small forms covered the floor. Larry blinked and they seemed to merge and melt away.

A huge black insect, almost the width of Larry's hand, stuck his

quivering head from a hole in the floor. He wagged huge phosphorescent whiskers at Larry and spoke and to Larry's listless interest, the bug was speaking perfect Terran.

"You're drugged, you know," the bug said in a high, shaky voice. "It must have been in the food. Of course, that's why it was so much better than usual this time, so you'd be sure to eat it."

The pink and purple men reappeared on the floor and swarmed over the bug, shrilling in incomprehensible voices, nonsense syllables: "An chrya morgobush! Travertina fo mibbsy!"

As each little man touched the bug's phosphorescent tendrils, he burst into a puff of green smoke.

The door swung open, invitingly. Someone said in the distance, "No tricks this time, hah?"

The man was standing there, and the twilight in the room darkened, brightened again into dawn. The man with the whip jeered from a corner. The little pink and purple men were crawling all over him and Larry laughed aloud to see his jailer covered with the swarming creatures; one of them disappeared into his pocket, another did a hornpipe on the man's bald head. Dimly he felt someone bend over him, shove up his closed eyelid. How could he see with closed eyes? He laughed at the absurdity of it.

"No tricks," said the jailer again; and all the little pink and purple men shouted in chorus " 'No tricks,' he said!"

Behind the man the door opened and Kennard Alton, in dark-green cloak and a drawn dagger in his hand, stood there. The little pink and purple men swarmed up his legs and nearly blotted out his figure. He raised the dagger and it turned into a bunch of pink tulips as he

brought it down toward the old bandit's back. Larry heard himself laugh, but the laugh came out like a trumpetblast as the pink tulips plunged into the man's back and a great flight of blackbirds gushed out, screaming wildly. Kennard kicked the fallen man, who disappeared into a swarming regiment of little pink and purple men laughing in isolated notes like small bells. Then Kennard strode across the room. The purple men swarmed up him, sat astride his nose, soared down the sunbeams, as Kennard stood over Larry.

"Come on! Every minute we're here, there's danger! Somebody might come. I'm not sure that old fellow's the only guard in the castle!"

Larry looked up at him and laughed idly. The little pink and purple mannikin on Kennard's nose was climbing up, digging footholds in Kennard's chin with a tiny ax of green light. Larry laughed again.

"Brush the gremlins off your chin first."

"Zandru!" Kennard bent over, pink tulips cascading from the front of his shirt. His hands clasped on Larry's shoulders like nutcrackers. "I want some nuts," Larry said, and giggled.

"Damn you, get up and come with me."

Larry blinked. He said clearly, in Terran, "You're not really here, you know. Any more than the little pink and purple gremlins are here. You're a figment of my imagination. Go away, figment. A figment with purple pigment."

The figment bent over Larry. In his hands there seemed to be a bowl of chili with beans. He began throwing it at Larry, handful by handful. It was unpleasant; Larry's head hurt and the beans, dripping off his chin, hurt like hard slaps. He yelled in Darkovan, "Save the beans! They're too hard! We might better eat them!"

The vision-Kennard straightened as if he had been knifed. He muttered, "Shallavan! But why did they give it to Larry? He's no telepath! Did they believe--"

Larry protested as Kennard turned into a steamshovel and lifted him sidewise. The next thing he knew, water was streaming down his face and Kennard Alton, white as a sheet, was standing and staring at him.

It was Kennard. He was real.

Larry said shakily "I-I thought you were a-a steamshovel. Is it--"

He looked down at the floor of the room. The old man lay there, blood caked on his leather jacket, and Larry hastily turned away. "Is he dead?"

"I don't know and I don't care," Kennard said grimly, "but we'll both be dead unless we get out of here before the bandits get back. Where's your other boot?"

"I threw it at him." Larry's head was splitting. "I missed."

"Oh, well--" Kennard said, deprecatingly, "you aren't used to this sort of thing. Get it on again--" he broke off. "What in the devil--" He surveyed the leather harness, anger in his eyes. "Zandru's hells, what a filthy contrivance!" He drew his dagger and cut through the leather. Larry's hand, numb and cramped, fell lifeless to his side. He could not move the fingers, and Kennard, swearing under his breath, knelt to help him with the boot.

Larry realized that he had no idea how long he had been drugged. He had a vague sort of memory of his jailer having come in once or twice before, but was not sure. He was still too dazed to do more

than stand, swaying and weak, before Kennard.

"How did you come to be here? How did you find me?"

"You were taken for me," Kennard said briefly. "Could I leave you to face the fate they meant for me? It was my responsibility to find you."

"But how? And why did you come alone?"

"We were in rapport through the crystal," Kennard said, "so I could trail you. I came alone, because we knew that with any assault in strength, they'd probably kill you at once. That can wait till later! Right now, we still have to get out of this place before Cyrillon and his devils come back!"

"I saw them ride away," Larry said slowly. "I think they're all gone except that one old man."

"No wonder they doped you, then," Kennard said. "They'd be afraid you'd play some telepathic trick. Most people are afraid of the Altons, though they wouldn't know if you were old enough to have the laran—the power. I don't have much of it myself. But let's get out of here!"

Carefully he went to the door and opened it a fraction. "The way he yelled, if there was anyone within shouting distance, they'd be all over us," Kennard said. "I think maybe you're right. They all must have gone."

Carefully, they came out into the corridor; walking on tiptoe, stole down the long stairs. Once Kennard muttered, "I hope we don't meet anyone! If I don't go out the way I came in, it would be damned easy to get lost in this place!"

Larry had not realized how immense this bandit stronghold was. He

came out of the prison room wavering, unsteady on his feet so that Kennard had to take hold of his arm and brace him until he could stand without shaking. Still groggy from the drug, it seemed that they hurried through miles of corridors, starting at every distant sound, flattening themselves against the walls when once something like a step echoed at the bottom of a flight of stairs. But it had died in the distance and the old castle was silent again, brooding.

A great gate loomed before them and Kennard shoving Larry back against the wall, peered out, sniffing the wind like a hunter. He said, tersely, "Seems quiet enough. We'll chance it. I don't know where the other gates are. I saw them ride away and took the chance."

The fresh air, bitterly cold, seemed to bite at Larry's bones, but it cleared the last traces of the drug from his head, and he stood staring around. Behind them, a high steep mountain face towered, rocky, speckled faintly with a scruff of underbrush and trees. Before them the narrow trail led away downward, through the valleys and hills, through the mountains where they had come.

Kennard said, swiftly, "Come on—we'll make a dash for it. If anyone's watching from those windows—" He made an edgy gesture upward toward the bleak castle face behind them. "If that old fellow isn't dead, and there are other guards, we've got maybe an hour before they start beating the woods for us."

He poised, said briefly, "Now-run," and raced across the yard toward the gates, Larry following. His arm ached fiercely where it had been strapped, and he was shaky on his feet, but even so, he reached the edge of the forest only a few seconds after Kennard, and the Darkovan boy looked at him a little less impatiently. They stood there, breathing hard, looking at each other in wordless question. What next?

"There's only one road through these mountains," Kennard said, "and that's the one the bandits used. We could follow it-keeping in sight of it, and hiding if we heard anyone. There's an awful lot of forest between here and home-they couldn't search it all. But"-he gestured--"I think they have watch-towers too, all through this country along the road. We ought to stay under cover of the trees, night and day, if we take that route. This whole stretch of country--" he stopped, thinking hard, and Larry saw vividly, in his mind's eye, the terrible journey over chasms and crags which had brought him here. Kennard nodded.

"That's why they don't guard their stronghold, of course; they think themselves guarded well enough by the mountain trail. You need good, mountain-bred, trail-broken horses to make it at all. I left my own horse on the other side of the mountain ridge. Somebody's probably picked her up by now. I'd hoped--"

The deep throat of an alarm bell suddenly clanged, raising echoes in the forest; a bird cried out noisily and flew away, and Kennard started, swearing under his breath.

"They've roused the whole castle-there must have been some of them left there!" he said, tensely, gripping Larry's arm. "In ten minutes this whole part of the woods will be alive with them! Come on!"

He ran-feeling twigs catch and hold at his clothing, stumbling into burrows and ridges, his breath coming short in the bitter cold. Before him Kennard dodged and twisted, half doubling back once and again, plunging through the trackless trees, and Larry, stumbling and racing in desperate haste to keep up, his head pounding, fled after him.

It seemed hours before Kennard dropped into a little hollow made by

the fallen branches of a tree. Larry dropped at his side, his head falling forward against the icy-wet grass. For a few moments all that he could do was breathe. Slowly the pounding of his heart calmed to something like normal and the darkness cleared from before his eyes. He raised himself half on his elbow, but Kennard jerked him down again.

"Lie flat!"

Larry was only too glad to obey. The world was still spinning; after a moment it spun completely away.

When he came up to consciousness again, Kennard was kneeling at his side, head raised, his ear cocked for the wind.

"They may have trackers on our trail," he said, tersely. "I thought I heard- Listen!"

At first Larry's ears, not trained to woodcraft, heard nothing. Then, very far away, lifting and rising in a long eerie wail, a shrill banshee scream that grew in intensity until his ears vibrated with the sound and he clasped his hands to his head to shut out the sheer torture of the noise. It faded away; rose again in another siren wail. He looked at Kennard; the older boy was stark white.

"What is it?" Larry whispered.

"Banshees," Kennard said, and his voice was a gasp. "They can track anything that lives-and they'll scent our body warmth. If they get wind of us we're done for!" He swore, gasping, his voice dying away in a half-sob. "Damn Cyrillon-damn him and his whole evil crew-Zandru whip them with scorpions in his seventh hell-Naotalba twist their feet on their ankles--" His voice rose to a half-scream of hysteria. He looked white with exhaustion. Larry gripped his

shoulders and shook him, hard.

"That won't help! What will?"

Kennard gasped and was silent. Slowly the color came back into his face and he listened, motionless, to the siren wail that rose and fell.

"About a mile off," he said tersely, "but they run like the wind. If we could change our smell--"

"They're probaby tracking by my clothing-smell," Larry said. "They took away my cloak. If I--"

Kennard had risen; he darted forward, suddenly, and fell into a bank of grayish shrubs. For a moment Larry, watching him roll and writhe in the leaves, thought that the hardships of the mountain journey had driven the Darkovan boy out of his wits. But when Kennard sat up his face though ashen was calm.

"Come here and roll in this," he ordered, "smear it all over your boots especially--"

Suddenly getting the idea, Larry grabbed handfuls of the leaves. They stung his hands with their furry needles, but he followed the older boy's example, daubing the leaves on face and hands, crushing their juice into clothing and boots. The leaves had a pungent, acrid smell that brought tears to his eyes like raw onions; but he crushed handfuls of the leaves over his boots and legs.

"This might or might not work," Kennard said, "but it gives us a bare chance-unless the smell of this stuff is like catnip to a kitten for those devilish things. If I knew more about them--"

"What are they?"

"Birds. Huge things-taller than a tall man, with long trailing thin wings-they can't fly. Their claws could rip your guts out at a stroke. They're blind, and normally they live in the mountain snows, and can scent anything warm that moves. And they scream like-well like banshees."

All the time he spoke, he and Larry were crushing the leaves, rubbing them into their skin and hair, soaking their clothing with the juice. The odor was sickening, and Larry thought secretly that anything with any sense of smell at all could trace them for miles, but perhaps the banshees were like Terran bloodhounds, set on by a particular smell and trained not to follow any other.

"Zandru alone knows how Cyrillon and his hordes managed to train those devilish things," Kennard muttered. "Listen-they're coming nearer. Come on. We'll have to run for it again, but try to move quietly."

They moved off through the brushwood again, working their way slowly up the hill, Larry trying to move softly; but he heard dead twigs snap beneath his feet, dry leaves crackle, the creak of branches as he moved against them. In contrast, Kennard moved as lightly as a leaf. And ever behind them the shrill banshee howl rose, swelled, died away and rose again, throbbing until it seemed to fill all space, till Larry felt he must scream with the noise that vibrated his eardrums and went rolling around in his skull until there was no room for anything but pulsing agony.

The path they were following began to rise, steeply now, and he had to catch at twigs and brushwood, and brace his feet against rocks, to force his way up the rising slope. His clothes were tattered, his face torn, and the stink of the gray leaves was all around them. The slope was in deep shadow; it was growing bitterly cold and above them the thick evening fog was deepening, till Larry could hardly see Kennard's back, a few feet before him. They struggled up the slope

and plunged down into a little valley, where Kennard's pace slackened somewhat and he waited for Larry to catch up with him. Larry, breathing hard, pressed his hands to his aching skull to shut out the banshee noise.

It lessened for a moment, died away in a sort of puzzled silence; began in a series of fresh yelps and wails, then faded out again. It was dimming with distance; Kennard, his face only a blur in the gathering fog, sighed and fell, exhausted, to the ground.

"We can rest a minute, but not too long," he warned.

Larry fell forward, dropping instantly into dead sleep. It seemed only a moment later-but it was black dark and a fine drizzling rain was falling and soaking them-that Kennard shook him awake again. The banshee howls were again filling the air-and on this side of the slope!

"They must have found the patch of ferns leaves and figured out what we'd done," he said, his voice dragging between his teeth, "and, of course, that stuff leaves a scent that a broken-down mule could follow from here to Nevartin!"

Larry strained his eyes to see through the thin darkness. Far down the slope there seemed a glint, just a pale glimmer in the moonlight. "Is there a stream at the bottom of the valley?"

"There might be. If there is--" Kennard was swaying with weariness. Larry, though aching in every muscle, found that the last traces of the drug were gone from his mind, and the brief sleep had refreshed him. He put his arm around Kennard's shoulders and guided the other boy's stumbling steps. "If we can get into the water--"

"They'll figure that trick out too," Kennard said hopelessly, and Larry felt him shudder, a deep thing that racked his bones. He pointed

upward and Larry followed his gaze. At the top of the slope, outlined against the sky, was a sight to freeze the marrow of his bones.

Bird? Surely no bird ever had that great gaunt outline, those drooping wings like a huge flapping cloak, the skull-like head that dripped a great phosphorescent red-glowing beak. The apparition craned a long dark neck and a dreadful throbbing cry vibrated to air-filling intensity.

Larry felt Kennard go rigid on his arm; the boy was staring upward, fixedly, like a bird hypnotized by a weaving snake.

But to Larry it was just another Darkovan horror; dreadful indeed-but he had seen so many horrors he was numb. He grabbed Kennard, and plunged with him down the slope, toward the distant glimmer. The banshee howl rose and fell, rose and fell on their heels, as they plunged through underbrush, careless now of noise or direction. The gleam of water loomed before them. They plunged in, fell full length with a splash, struggled up and ran, splashing, racing, stumbling on stones. Twice Larry measured his length in the shallow icy stream and his clothing stiffened and froze in the icy air, but he dared not slacken his speed. The banshee howl grew, louder and louder, then slackened again in a puzzled, yelping wail, an almost plaintive series of cheated whimpers. It seemed to run round in circles. It was joined by further howls, yelps and whimpers. They splashed along in the stream for what seemed hours, and Larry's feet were like lumps of ice. Kennard was stumbling; he fell again and again to his knees and the last time he fell with his head on the bank and lay still. None of Larry's urging could make him rise. The Darkovan lad had simply reached the end of his fantastic endurance.

Larry dragged him out, on the far side of the stream, hauled him into the shelter of the forest, and sat there listening to the gradually diminishing wails and yelps of frustrated banshees. Far away on the

slope he saw torches and lights. They were beating the bushes, but with their tracking birds cheated, there was no way to follow their escaped prey. But would they pick up the scent again downstream? Larry, conscious that he was famished, remembered that a day or two ago-before the drugging-he had thrust a piece of the coarse bread into his pocket. He hauled it out and began to gnaw on it; then, remembering broke it in half and stowed the other half in his other pocket for Kennard. As he did so, his hands touched metal, and he felt the smooth outline of his Terran medical kit. Small as it was, it probably contained nothing for his scratches and bruises, but-

Of course! He pulled urgently at Kennard's hand; when the Darkovan boy stirred and moaned, he put the bread in his hand, then whispered, "Listen. I think we can outwit them even if they pick up our scent downstream. Here. Eat that, and then listen!" He was fumbling in the dark, by touch, in his medical kit. He found the half-empty tube of burn ointment he had used after the fire, unscrewed the cap and smelled the sharp, unfamiliar chemical smell.

"This should puzzle them for a while," he said, smearing a thin layer of the stuff, first on his boots and then on Kennard's. Kennard munching the bread, nodded in approval. "They might pick uperis leaves. Not this stuff."

They rested a little, then began cautiously to crawl up the far slope. There was plenty of cover, though the plants and thorny bushes of the underbrush tore at their faces and hands. Kennard's leather riding-breeches did not suffer so badly as Larry's cloth ones, but their hands and faces were torn and bleeding, and the red sun was beginning to thin away the dawn clouds, before they reached the summit of the slope and lay on the rocks exhausted, too weary to move another step. Behind them, in the valley they had left, there seemed no sign of men or banshees.

"They may have called off the hunt," Kennard muttered, "Banshees are torpid in the sunlight-they're nightbirds. We just might have got clean away."

Huddling his cloak round him, he knelt and looked down into the far valley. It was a huge bowl of land, filled to the brim with layered forest. Near the top, where they were, there was underbrush and low scrubby conifers, and snow lay in thin patches in hollows of the ground where the sun had not warmed. Lower down were tall trees and thick brushwood, while the valley was thick with uncleared forest. Not a house, not a farm, not a cleared space of land, not even a moving figure. Only the wheeling of a hawk above them, and the silent trees below them, moved in response to their dragging steps. They had escaped Cyrillon's castle. But in the growing red light, their eyes met, and the same thought was in them both.

They had escaped bandits and banshees. But they were hundreds of miles from safe, known country-alone, on foot, almost weaponless, in the great trackless unexplored forests of the wildest part of Darkover.

They were alive.

And that was just about all that they could say.

ALL THAT DAY they walked, through the trails of the forest. Now and again, from the corner of their eyes, they caught a glimpse of movement, but they saw not a sign of a trailman. They slept that night hearing sounds overhead, but now without fear, knowing that the yellow garlands would protect them in trailman country.

So far neither of them had spoken of their escape. There was no need for words between them now. But when, on the second day-a day clouded and sunless, with a promise of rain-they sat to eat their meal of berries and the odd fungus the trailmen had shown them, which grew plentifully along these paths Kennard finally spoke.

"You know, of course, that there will be fires. Houses will burn. Maybe even woods will burn. They're not human."

"I'm not so sure," Larry said thoughtfully. "Among the Terrans, they would be called at least humanoid. They have a culture."

"Yet was it safe to give them fire? I would never have dared," Kennard said, "not if we died there. For more centuries than I can count, man and nonhuman have lived together on Darkover in a certain balance. And now, with the trailmen using fire--" He shrugged, helplessly, and Larry suddenly began to see the implications of what he had done. "Still," he said stubbornly, "they'll learn. They'll make mistakes, there will be mis-uses, but they will learn. Their pottery will improve as it is fired. They will, perhaps, learn to cook food. They will grow and develop. Nothing remains static," he said. He repeated the Terran creed, "A civilization changes-or it dies."

Kennard's face flushed in sudden, sullen anger, and Larry, realizing

that for the first time since his rescue they were conscious of being alien to one another, knew something else. Kennard was jealous. He had been the rescuer, the leader. Yet Larry had saved them, where Kennard would have given up because he feared change. Larry had taken command-and Kennard, second place.

"That is the Terran way," Kennard said sullenly. "Change. For better or worse, but change. No matter how good a thing is-change it, just for the sake of change."

Larry, with a growing wisdom, was silent. It was, he knew, a deeper conflict than they could ever resolve with words alone; a whole civilization based on expansion and growth, pitted against one based on tradition. He felt like saying, "Anyhow, we're alive," but forbore. Kennard had saved his life many times over. It hardly would become him to boast about beginning to even the score.

That evening they came to the edge of the trailmen's rain forest and into the open foothills again-bare, trackless hills, unexplored, rocky, covered with scrubby brush and low, bunchy grass. Beyond them lay the mountain ranges, and beyond that-

"There lies the pass," Kennard said, "and beyond it lies Hastur country, and the home of Castle Hastur. We're within sight of home." He sounded hopeful, even joyous, but Larry heard the trembling in his voice. Before them lay miles of canyons and gullies, without road or track or path, and beyond that lay the high mountain pass. The day was dim and sunless, the peaks in shadow, but even at this distance Larry could see that snow lay in their depths.

"How far?"

"Four days travel, perhaps, if it were open prairie or forest," Kennard said. "Or one day's ride on a swift horse, if any horse could travel

these infernal arroyos."

He stood frowning, gazing down into the mazelike network of canyons. "The worst of it is, the sun is clouded, and I find it hard to calculate the path we must follow. From here to the pass we must travel due westward. But with the sun in shadow--" He knelt momentarily, and Larry, wondering if he were praying, saw that instead he was examining the very faint shadow cast by the clouded sun. Finally he said, "As long as we can see the mountain peak, we need only follow it. I suppose"-he rose, shrugging wearily--"we may as well begin."

He set off downward into one of the canyons. Larry, envying him his show of confidence, stumbled after him. He was weary and footsore, and hungry, but he would not show himself less manly than Kennard.

All that day and all the next they stumbled and scrambled among the thorny, rocky slopes of the barren foothills. They went in no danger of hunger, for the bushes, so thorny and barren in appearance, were lush with succulent berries and ripening nuts. That evening Kennard snared several small birds who were feeding fearlessly on their abundance. They were out of trailmen country now, so that they dared to make fire; and it seemed to Larry that no festive dinner had ever tasted so good as the flesh of these nutty birds, roasted over their small fire and eaten half-raw and without salt. Kennard said, as they sat companionably munching drumsticks, "This place is a hunter's paradise! The birds are without fear."

"And good eating," Larry commented, cracking a bone for the succulent marrow.

"It's even possible that we might meet a hunting party." Kennard said hopefully. "Perhaps some of the men from the Hastur country beyond the mountains hunt here-where the game roams in such abundance."

But they were both silent at the corollary of that statement. If no one hunted here, where the hunting was so splendid, then the mountain pass that lay between them and safety must be fearsome indeed!

The third day was cloudier than the last, and Kennard stopped often to examine the fainter and fainter shadows and calculate the sun's position by them. The land was rising now; the gullies were steeper and more thorny, the slopes harder to scramble up. Toward that evening a thin, fine drizzle began to fall, and even Kennard, with all his skill, could not build a fire. They gnawed cold roast meat from the night before, and dampish fruits, and slept huddled together for warmth in a rock-lined crevasse.

All the next day the rain drizzled down, thin and pale, and the purplish light held no hint of sun or shadow. Larry, watching Kennard grow ever more silent and tense, could not at last contain his anxiety. He said, "Kennard, we're lost. I know we're going the wrong way. Look, the land slopes downhill, and we have to keep going upward toward the mountains."

"I know we're going downhill, muffin-head," snapped Kennard, "into this canyon. On the other side the land rises higher. Can't you see?"

"With this rain I can't see a thing," said Larry honestly, "and what's more, I don't think you can either."

Kennard rounded on him, suddenly furious: "I suppose you think you could do better?"

"I didn't say that," Larry protested, but Kennard was tensely trying to find a shadow. It seemed completely hopeless. They were not even sure of the time of day, so that even the position of the sun would have been no help, could they have seen a shadow; this damp, darkish drizzle made no distinction between early afternoon and

deep twilight.

He heard Kennard murmur, almost in despair, "If I could only get a sight of the mountain peak!"

It was the first time the Darkovan boy had sounded despair, and Larry felt the need to comfort and reassure. He said, "Kennard, it's not as bad as all that. We won't starve here. Sooner or later the sun will shine, or the rain will stop, and the pass will be before us clearly. Then any one of these little hilltops will show us our right direction. Why don't we find a sheltered place and just wait out the rainstorm?"

He had not expected instant agreement, but he was not prepared for the violence, the fury with which the Darkovan boy rounded on him.

"You damned, infernal, bumbling idiot," he shouted, "what do you think I'd do if it was only me? Do you think I can't have sense enough to do what any ten-year-old with sense enough to tie his own bootlaces would do in such a storm? But with you--"

"I don't understand--"

"You wouldn't," shouted Kennard. "You never understand anything, you damned-Terranan!" For the first time in all their friendship, the word on his lips was an insult. Larry felt his blood rise high in return. Kennard had saved his life; but there was a point beyond which he could not rub it in any further.

"If I have so little sense--?"

"Listen," Kennard said, with suppressed violence, "my father gave his surety to the Terranan lords for your safety. Do you think you can simply disappear? Your damned Terrans who can never let any man live his own life or die his own death? No, damn it. If you visit my people-and you vanish and are killed-do you suppose the Terrans

will ever believe it was accident and not a deep-laid plot? You headblind Terrans without even telepathy enough to know when a man speaks truth, so that your fumbling insolent idiots of people dared-theydared! -to doubt that my father, a lord of the Comyn and of the Seven Domains, spoke truth?

"It's true, I rescued you for my own honor and because we had sworn friendship. But also because, unless I brought you safely back to your people, your damned Terrans will be poking and prying, searching and avenging!" He stopped. He had to. He was completely out of breath after his outburst, his face red with fury, his eyes blazing, and Larry, in sudden terror, felt the other's rage as a murderous, almost a deadly thing. He realized suddenly that he stood very close to death at that moment. The fury of an unleashed telepath-and one too young to have control over his power-beat on Larry with a surge of power like a ship. It rolled over him like a crashing surf. It pounded him physically to his knees.

He bent before it. And then, as suddenly as it had come, he realized that he had strength to meet it. He raised his eyes gravely to Kennard and said aloud, "Look, my friend"-(he used the word *bredu*) "-I did not know this. I did not make my people's laws, no more than you caused the feud that set the bandits on our hunting party." And he was amazed at the steady force with which he countered the furious assault of rage.

Slowly, Kennard quieted. Larry felt the red surges of Kennard's fury receding, until at last the Darkovan boy stood before him silent, just a kid again and a scared one. He didn't apologize, but Larry didn't expect him to. He said, simply, "So it's a matter of time, you see, Lerrys." The Darkovan form of Larry's name was, Larry knew, tacit apology. "And as you care for your people, I care for my father. And this is the first day of the rainy season. I had hoped to be out of these hills, and through the passes, before this. We were delayed by the

trailmen, or we should be safe now, and a message of your safety on its way to your father. If I had the starstone still--" he was silent, then shrugged. "Well, that is the Comyn law." He drew a deep breath. "Now, which way did you say you thought was west?"

"I didn't say," Larry said, honestly. He did not know until much later just how rare a thing he had done; he had faced the unleashed wrath of an Alton and a telepath-and been unharmed. Later, he remembered it and shook in his shoes; but now he just felt relieved that Kennard had calmed down.

"But," he said, "there's no point in going in circles. All these canyons look exactly alike to me. If we had a compass--" He broke off. He began to search frantically in his pockets. The bandits had not taken it from him because the main blade was broken. The trailmen had not even seen it. As a weapon it was worthless. He had not even been able to use it to help Kennard clean and gut the birds they had eaten.

But it had a magnetized blade!

And a magnetized blade, properly used, could make an improvised compass... .

The first turn-out of his pockets failed to find it; then he remembered that during their time with the trailmen, fearing they might regard any tool, however small, as a weapon, he had thrust it into his medical kit. He took it out, and snapped the magnetized blade off against a stone, then tested it against the metal of the broken main blade. It retained its magnetism. Now if he could only remember how it was done. It had been a footnote in one of his mathematics texts in childhood, half forgotten. Kennard, meanwhile, watched as if Larry's brain had snapped, while Larry experimented with a bit of string and finally, looking at Kennard's long, square-cut hair, demanded, "Give

me one of your hairs."

"Are you out of your wits?"

"No," Larry said. "I think I may bein them, at last. I should have thought of this from the beginning. If I could have taken a bearing when the sun was still shining, and we had a clear view of the pass ahead of us, I'd know--"

Without raising his head, he accepted the hair which Kennard gave him gingerly, as if he were humoring a lunatic. He knotted the hair around the magnetized blade and waited. The blade was tiny and light, hardly bigger than the needles which had been the first improvised compasses. It swung wildly for a few moments; stopped.

"What superstitious rigamarole--" Kennard began, stopped. "You must have something on your mind," he conceded, "but what?"

Larry began to explain the theory by which the magnetic compass worked; Kennard cut him short.

"Everyone knows that a certain kind of metal-you call it a magnet-will attract metal. But how can this help us?"

For a moment Larry despaired. He had forgotten the level of Darkovan technology-or lack of it-and how could he, in one easy lesson, explain the two magnetic poles of a planet, the theory of the magnetic compass which pointed to the true pole at all times, the manner of taking a compass direction and following? He started, but he was making very heavy weather of explaining the magnetic field around a planet. To begin with, he simply did not have the technological vocabulary in Darkovan-if there was one, which he doubted. He was reminded of the trailman chief calling fire "the red thing which eats the woods." He felt like that, while he tried to explain

about iron filings and magnetic currents. Finally he gave up, holding the improvised compass in one hand.

He said helplessly, "Kennard, I can't explain it to you any more than you can explain to me how you destroyed that blue jewel of yours-or how your psychics herded a batch of clouds across the sky to put out a fire. But I helped you do it, didn't I? And it worked? We can't possibly be any worse off than we are already, can we? And the Terran ships find their way between the stars by using this kind of-of science. So will you at least let metry? "

Kennard was silent for a moment. At last he said, "I suppose you are right. We could not be worse off."

Larry knelt and drew an improvised sketch map on the ground, what he remembered of the mountain range he had seen from the distance. "Now here's the mountains and here is the edge of the trailmen's forest. How far had we come before you lost sure sight of exactly where we were going?"

Hesitantly, with many frowns and remembering, Kennard traced out a route.

"And that was-exactly how long ago? Try to be as accurate as you can, Kennard; how many miles ago did you begin not to be absolutely sure?"

Kennard put his finger on the improvised map.

"So we're within about five hours walk from that point." He drew a circle around the point Kennard had shown as their last positive location. "We could be anywhere in this circle, but if we keep west and keep going west we'll have to hit the mountains-we can't possibly miss them." He tried not to think of what would lie before

them then. Kennard thought of it as just the final hurdle, but the journey with the bandits through their own dreadful chasms and crags-bound and handcuffed like sacked luggage-had given him an enduring horror of the Darkovan mountains that was to last his lifetime.

"If this works..." Kennard said, skeptically, but immediately looked an apology. "What do I have to do first? Is there any specific ritual for the use of this-this amulet?"

Larry, by main force, held back a shout of half-hysterical laughter. Instead, he said gravely, "Just cross your fingers that it will work," and started questioning Kennard about the minor discrepancies, of the seasons, and the sun's rising and setting. Darkover-he knew from its extremes of climate-must be a planet with an exaggeratedly tilted axis, and he would have to figure out just how far north or south of true west the sun set at this season of the year in this latitude. How he blessed the teacher at Quarters B who had loaned him the book on Darkovan geography-otherwise he might not even have been sure whether they were in the southern, rather than the northern hemisphere. He boggled at the thought of trying to explain an equator to Kennard.

A degree or two wouldn't matter-not with a range of mountains hundreds of miles long, that they couldn't miss if they tried-but the nearer they came out to the pass itself, the sooner they would be home. And the sooner Kennard's father would be out of trouble. He was amazed at how responsible he felt.

The compass would steady, he realized, if he let it swing freely without his hand moving. All they had to do was take a rough bearing, follow it, checking it again and again every few miles.

Once again, he realized, he had taken the lead in the expedition, and

Kennard, reluctantly, was forced to follow. It bothered him, and he knew Kennard didn't like it. He hoped, at least, that it wouldn't bring on another outburst of rage.

He stood up, looking at the muddy mess of their improvised map. He was cold and drenched, but he assumed an air of confidence which, in reality, he was far from feeling.

"Well, if we're going to risk it," he said, "west is that way. So let's start walking. I'm ready if you are."

It was hard, slow going, scrambling into canyons and up slopes, stopping every hour to swing the compass free and wait for it to steady and point, re-drawing the improvised compass card in the mud. Larry finally shortened this step by drawing one on a page of his battered notebook. The rain went on, remorselessly, not hard, never soaking, but always there - a thin, fine, chilling drizzle that eventually seemed worse than the worst and hardest downpour. His arm, the one the bandits had harnessed behind his back, felt both numb and sore, but there wasn't a thing he could do but set his teeth and try to think about something else. That night they literally dug themselves into a bank of dead leaves, in a vain attempt to keep some of the worst of the rain off. Their clothes were wet. Their skin was wet. Their boots and socks were wet. The food they munched was wet-berries, nuts, fruits and a sort of root like a raw potato. Kennard could easily enough have snared small game, but they tacitly agreed that even cold raw sour berries and mushrooms were preferable to raw wet meat. And Kennard swore that in this drizzle, at this season, in this kind of country, not even akyrri could strike enough spark to kindle a fire!

But toward nightfall of the next day-Larry had lost count of time, nothing existed now but the trudging through wet gulleys and slopes and thorny brushwood-Kennard stopped and turned to him.

"I owe you an apology. This toy of yours is working and I know it now."

"How?" Larry was almost too exhausted to care.

"The air is thinner and the rain is colder. Don't you find it harder to breathe? We must be rising very rapidly now toward the mountain ranges-must have come up several thousand feet in the last few hours alone. Didn't you notice that the western edge of every new gully was higher and harder to climb than the last?"

Larry had thought it was just his own tiredness that had made it seem so; but now that Kennard confirmed it, it seemed indeed that the land had somehow changed character. It was barer; the ridges were longer and steeper, and the abundant berries and nuts and mushrooms had dwindled to a few of the sparser, sourer kind.

"We're getting into the mountains, all right," Kennard said, "and that means we'd better stop early, tonight, and find all the food we can carry. There's nothing in the passes except snow and ice and a few wild birds that nest in the crags and live on the berries up there-berries which happen to be poisonous to humans."

Larry knew he might have found a way out of a couple of serious dilemmas with Terran science, but without Kennard's woodcraft they would both have died many times over.

Food was far from easy to find; they spent hours gathering enough for a sparse supper and a few more meager meals, and during the next day, vegetation diminished almost to nothing. However, Kennard was almost jubilant. If they were actually that near to the mountains, they must be nearing the pass. And that evening, for a little while, like an unexpected gift, the fog and drizzle cleared briefly, and they saw the high peak and the pass that lay below it, shining

with the mauve and violet glare of the red sun on the snow, clear before their eyes and less than ten miles away. The brief flash of sun lasted only five minutes or so, but it was long enough for Larry to adjust and check his improvised compass card, take an exact bearing on the pass, and lay out a proper course. After that, whenever any steep slope or rock-ledge forced them to deviate from a chosen direction, he marked it and could correct for it; so that now, instead of going in roughly the right direction, he knew they were going direct for their destination.

But, vindicated though he was in Kennard's eyes; the going was rough now, and getting rougher. There were steep rock-slopes on which they had to scramble on all fours, clutching for handholds on slippery ledges; and once they had to traverse a two-inch-wide track above a cliff-face that left Larry pale and sweating with terror. Kennard took these rock-scrambles quite in stride, and was getting back some of his old, arrogant assurance of leadership, and it bothered Larry. Damn it, it wasn't his fault that he hadn't been trained to climb rock-faces, nor did it make him a passive follower, just because heights of this sort made him sick and dizzy. He gritted his teeth, vowing to himself that anywhere Kennard led, he'd follow-even though it seemed that Kennard could often have chosen easier paths, and was trying to re-establish his own leadership of the expedition by showing off his own superior, mountain-craft.

Their provisions ran out that night; they slept, hungry, cold and wet, on a frost-rimed slope a little more level than most-or rather, Kennard slept; Larry had trouble even in breathing. The morning dawned, and long before it was full light, Kennard stirred. He said, "I know you're not asleep. We may as well start. If we're lucky we'll reach the pass before noon." In the bleak morning dimness Larry could not see his friend's face, but he did not need to see. The emotions there were as clear to him as if he were inside Kennard's mind: On the other side of the passes, there is food, and inhabited country, and warmth, and

people to turn to for help. But the pass is going to be hard going. I wouldn't like doing it even with a couple of experienced guides to help. If it doesn't snow, we might get through -if the snow's not already too deep. Can the Terran boy hold out? He's already about exhausted. If he gives in now...

And the despair in that thought suddenly overwhelmed Larry; Kennard was thinking, If he gives out now, I'll be alone... and it will all be for nothing... .

Larry wondered suddenly if he were imagining all this, if the height and the hardship were affecting his own mind. This sort of mental eavesdropping didn't make sense. Also, it embarrassed him. He tried, desperately, to close his mind against it, but Kennard's misgivings were leaking through all barriers:

Can Larry hold out? Can he make it? Have I got strength enough for both of us?

Silently, grimly, Larry resolved that if one of them gave out, it would not be himself. He was cold hungry and wet, but by damn, he'd show this arrogant Darkovan aristocrat something.

Damn it! He was sick of being helped along and treated like the burden and the weaker one!

Terrans weak? Hadn't the Terrans been the first to cross space! Hadn't they taken the blind leap in the dark, before the stardrives, traveling years and years between the stars, ships disappearing and never being heard of again, and yet the race from Terra had spread through all inhabited worlds! Kennard could be proud of his Darkovan heritage and bravery. But there was something to be proud of in the Terrans, too! They had, in a way, their own arrogance, and it was just as reasonable as the Darkovan arrogance.

Here he had assumed, all along, that he was somehow inferior because, on a Darkovan world and in a Darkovan society, he was a burden to Kennard. Suppose it was reversed? Kennard did not understand the workings of a compass. He would be utterly baffled at the drives of a spaceship or a surface-car.

But even if he died here in the mountain passes, he was going to show Kennard that where a Darkovan could lead a Terran could follow! And then, damn it, when they got back to his world, he'd challenge Kennard to try following him a while in the world of the Terrans-and see if a Darkovan could follow where a Terran led!

He got up, grinned wryly, turned his pockets inside out in the hope of a stray crumb of food-there wasn't one-and said, "The sooner the better."

The grade was steeper now, and there began to be snow underfoot; they went very carefully, guarding against a sideslip that could have meant a ghastly fall. His injured arm felt numbed and twice it slipped on handholds, but he proudly refused Kennard's offers of help.

"I'll manage," he said, tight-mouthed.

They came to one dreadful stretch where frost-sheathed stones littered a high ledge without a sign of a track; Kennard, who was leading, set his foot tentatively on the ledge, and it crumbled beneath him, sending pebbles crashing down in a miniature rockslide whitened with powdery snow. He staggered and reeled at the edge of the abyss, but even before he swayed Larry had moved, catching the flash of fear at the touch, and grabbed and held him, hard-the older boy's weight jerking his hurt arm almost from the socket-until Kennard could recover his balance. They clung together, gasping, Kennard with fear and relief and Larry with mingled, fright and pain; something had snapped in the injured shoulder and his arm hung stiff

and immovable at his side, sending shudders of agony down his side when he as much as moved a finger.

Kennard finally wiped his brow. "Zandru's hells, I thought I was gone," he muttered. "Thanks, Lerrys. I'm all right now. You--" He noted Larry's immobility. "What's the trouble?"

"My arm," Larry managed to get out shakily.

Kennard touched it with careful fingers, drew a deep whistle. He moved his fingertips over it, his face intent and concentrated. Larry felt a most strange, burning itch deep in his bones under the touch; then Kennard, without a word of warning, suddenly seized the shoulder and gave it a violent, agonizing twist. Larry yelled in pain; he couldn't help it. But as the pain subsided, he realized what Kennard had done.

Kennard nodded. "I had to slip the damned thing back into the socket before it froze the muscles around it. Or it would have taken three men to hold you down while they worked it back into place," he said.

"How did you know-?"

"Deep-probed," Kennard said briefly. "I can't do it often, or very long. But I--" he hesitated, did not finish his sentence. Larry heard it anyhow: I owed you that much. But damn it, now we're both exhausted!

"And we've still got that devilish ledge to cross," he said aloud. He began unfastening his belt; tugged briefly at Larry's. Larry, curiously, watched him buckle them together and slip the ends around their wrists.

"Shame you can't use your left hand," he said tersely. "Too bad they

found out you were left-handed. Now, well start across. Let me lead. This is a hell of a place for your first lesson in climbing this kind of a rock-ledge, but here it is. Always have at least three things all together hanging on. Never move one foot without the other foot and both hands anchored. And the same with either hand." His unfinished sentence again was perfectly clear to Larry: Both our lives are in his hands, because he's the weakest.

For the rest of his life, Larry remembered the agonizing hour and a half it took them to cross the twenty-foot stretch of rock-strewn ledge. There were places where the least movement started showers of rocks and snow; yet they could only cling together like limpets to their handholds and to the face of the rock. Above and below was sheer cliff; there was no help there, and if they retraced their steps, to find an easier way, they would never get across. Half a dozen times, Larry slipped and the belt jerking them back together saved him from a very long drop into what looked like nothingness and fog below. Halfway across, a thin fine powdery snow began to fall, and Kennard swore in words Larry couldn't even begin to follow.

"That was all we needed!" Suddenly he seemed to brighten up, and placed his next foot more cautiously. "Well, Larry, this is it-this has got to be the worst. Nothing worse than this could possibly happen. From now, things can only get better. Come on-left foot this time. Try that greyish hunk of rock. It looks solid enough."

But at last they were on firm ground again, dropping down as they were in the snow, exhausted, to breathe deep and slow and gasp like runners just finished with a ten-mile race. Kennard, accustomed to the mountains, was as usual the first to recover, and stood up, his voice jubilant.

"I told you it would get better! Look, Larry!"

He pointed. Above them the pallid and snowy light showed them the pass less than a hundred feet away, leading between rock-sheltered banks—a natural walkway, deeply banked with the falling snow, but sloping only gradually so that they could walk erect.

"And on the other side of that pass, Larry, there are people—my people—friends, who will help us. Warmth and food and fire and—" he broke off. "It seems too good to be true."

"I'd settle for dry feet and something hot to eat," Larry said, then froze, while Kennard still moved toward the pass. The terrible, creeping tension he had felt just before their capture by the trailmen was with him again. It gripped him by the throat; forced him to run after Kennard, grabbing at him with his good arm, holding him back by main force. He couldn't speak; he could hardly breathe with the force of it. The wave surged and crested, the precognition, the foreknowing of terrible danger... .

It broke. He could breathe again. He gasped and caught at Kennard and pointed and heard the older boy shriek aloud, but the shriek was lost in the siren screaming wail that rose and echoed in the rocky pass. Above them, a huge and ugly craning head, bare of feathers, eyeless and groping, snaked upward, followed by a huge, ungainly body, dimly shining with phosphorescent light. It bore down upon them, clumsily but with alarming speed, cutting off their approach to the pass. The siren-like wailing scream rose and rose until it seemed to fill all the air and all the world.

It had been too good to be true.

The pass was a nest of one of the evil banshee-birds.

THE TRAIL downward was hard, rough going; but with the fear of the banshees behind them and Larry's growing skill at rock-climbing, they managed the descent better than the ascent. Weary, half starved, Larry felt a relief all out of measure to their present situation-for in a trackless, almost foodless forest, they had still several days walking to cover before they came to inhabited country. They had seen it from the pass, but it was far away.

And yet the optimism seeded in him, growing higher and higher, like a cresting wave, like...

Like the growth of his fear when they had been in the acute danger of capture by the trailmen and he had not yet known it!

What kind of freak am I? How did I get it? I'm no telepath. And it can't be learned.

Yet he felt this cresting, flooding hope-almost like a great joy. The woods seemed somehow greener, the sky a more brilliant mauve, the red sun to shine with brilliance and glory overhead. Could it be only relief at escape? Or-

"Kennard, do you suppose we might meet a hunting party who are in these woods?"

Kennard, learned in woodcraft, chuckled wryly. "Who would hunt here-and what for? There seems to be not a sign of game in these woods, though later we may find fruit or berries. You look damned optimistic," he added, rather sullenly still.

He's mad because I faced him down. But he'll get over it.

They scrambled their way to the lip of a rocky rise in the land, and stood looking down into a green valley, so beautiful that in the grip of this unexplained joy Larry stood almost ecstatically, entranced by the trees, by the little stream that ran silver at the bottom. Songbirds were singing. And through the birdsong, and the clear-running water, there was another sound-a clear voice, singing. The voice of a human creature.

In another moment, through the trees, a tall figure appeared. He was singing, in a musical, unknown tongue.

Kennard stood half-enraptured. He whispered, "Achieri! "

Human?

The creature was, indeed, human in form, though tall and of such a fragile slenderness that he seemed even more so. He? Was the creature a woman? The voice had been clear and high, like a woman's voice. It wore a long robe of some gleaming grayish silky substance. Long pale hair lay across the slim shoulders. The beckoning hand was white and almost translucent in the sunlight, and the bones of the face had an elfin, delicate, triangular beauty.

Flying around the head of the elfin creature were a multitude of singing birds, whose melodious voices mingled with that of the chieri. Suddenly the chieri looked sharply upward, and called in a clear voice, "You there, you evil trampers! Go, before you frighten my birds, or I put an ill word on you!"

Kennard stepped forward, raising his hands in a gesture of surrender and respect. Larry remembered the respect the Darkovan boy had shown Lorill Hastur. This was more than respect, it was deference, it was almost abasement.

"Child of grace," he said, half-audibly, "we mean no harm to you or your birds. We are lost and desperate. My friend is hurt. If you can give us no help, give us at least none of your evil will."

The beautiful, epicene face, suddenly clear in the patch of sunlight, softened. Raising the thin hands, the chieri let the birds fly free, in a whirling cloud. Then the creature beckoned to them, but as they began to trudge wearily down the slope, it ran lightly upward to them.

"You are hurt! You have cuts and bruises; you are hungry, you have come through that dreadful pass haunted by evil things-?"

"We have," Kennard said faintly, "and we have crossed all the country from the castle of Cyrillon des Trailles."

"What are you?"

"I am Comyn," Kennard said, with his last scraps of dignity, "of the Seven Domains. This-this lad is my friend andbredu. Give us shelter, or at least no harm!"

Thechieri's fair and mobile face was gentle. "Forgive me. Evil things come sometimes from the high passes, and foul my clear pools and frighten my birds. They fear me, fortunately-but I do not always see them. But you--" Thechieri looked at them, a clear piercing gray gaze, and said, "You mean no harm to us."

The glance held Larry's eyes spellbound. Kennard whispered, "Are you a mightyleronis? "

"I am of the chieri. Are you wiser, son of Alton?"

"You know my name?"

"I know your name, Kennard son of Valdir, and your friend's. Yet I

have none of your Comyn powers. But you are weary, and your friend, in pain; so no more talk now. Can you walk a steep path?" The chieri seemed almost apologetic. "I must guard myself, in this land."

Larry, drawing himself upright, said, "I can go where I must."

Kennard said, "You lend us grace, child of light. And blessed was the lord of Carthon when he met with Kierestelli beside the wells of Reuel."

"Is that tale still known?" The alien, elfin face was merry. "But time enough later for tales and old legends, son of the Seven Domansa. No more talk now. Come."

Thechieri turned, taking an upward path. It was a long climb and Larry was sweating in exhaustion, his injured arm feeling ready to drop off, before they reached the top. At the end, Kennard was half carrying him. But even Kennard was too weary to do more, and the chieri came, an arm around each, and supported them. Frail, almost boneless as the creature looked, it was incredibly strong.

They came out upon a flat space, screened with living boughs, and entered a door of woven wicker into the strangest room he had ever seen.

The floor was of earth, not mud or of sun-dried brick, but carpeted thickly with grass and living moss in which a cricket chirped; it felt warm and fragrant under their feet.

Thechieri bent and removed his sandals, and at his signal, the boys removed their wet and soaking boots and worn socks. The grass felt comfortable to their weary feet.

The walls were of woven wicker, screened lightly with thin hangings

of cloth, heavy but not coarse, which admitted light but could not be seen through. In the roof of thatch, vines with great trumpet-shaped blossoms were growing, which pervaded the whole place with a fragrance of green and growing things. It smelled fresh, and sweet. An opened door at the back led to an enclosed garden where a fountain splashed into a stone bowl, running out and away in a little rivulet. A fire burned there in a small brazier of hardened clay, and over it was a metal crane on which a steaming kettle swung, giving forth a good smell of hot food. The lads felt their eyes watering at this steam. Furniture there was little, save for a bench or chest or two, and at the edge of the room an upright loom with a strung web on it.

As they entered, the chieri raised its hands, saying in its clear voice, "Enter in a good hour, and let no fear or danger trouble you within these walls." That done, it turned to Larry, saying, "You are hurt and in pain, and you flee from evil things. I sensed your minds within the pass. I will ask no more till you have had rest and food."

It went to the brazier, and Kennard, sinking down on the grass wearily, said, "Who are you, child of grace?"

"You may call me Narad-zinie," said the chieri, "which is my name among your people. My own would be strange to your ears and overlong." From a chest it took silver cups, plainly but beautifully worked, and poured drink into them. It offered a cup to each. Larry tasted; it was delicious, but very strong wine. He hesitated a moment, then his weariness and thirst overcame him; he drank it up anyhow. Almost at once the sense of complete exhaustion left him and he watched alertly as the chieri moved the kettle aside from the brazier.

"Porridge is slim food alone for footsore travelers," it said. "I will make you some cakes as well. No more wine until you have eaten, though! Meanwhile--" It gestured at the fountain, and Larry, suddenly

abashed at his dirty and torn clothes, went to wash and douse his head under the fountain. Kennard followed suit.

When Larry came back, something like pancakes were baking on a flat griddle over the brazier. They smelled so good that his mouth watered. Thechieri brought them food on flat, beautifully carved wooden trays, and there were also bowls of porridge, the flat pancakes which had a yeasty, puffy texture, bowls of hot milk, honey and what tasted like cheese. The flavors were oddly pungent, but the boys were far too hungry to care; they demolished everything in sight, and the chieri brought them second helpings of pancakes and honey. Replete at last, they leaned back and surveyed the room, and Larry's first words were oddly irrelevant.

"The trailmen might evolve something like this, instead of what you fear, Kennard."

Thechieri answered for Kennard. "The trail-folk, in the far-back times, were our kinfolk, but then we left the trees and built fire, they feared it and our ways moved apart. They are our younger brothers, to grow more slowly in wisdom. But perhaps it is time, indeed, for what this child of two worlds has done."

Larry stared up at the alien's strange beautiful face. "You-know all this?"

"The Comyn powers arechieri powers, little brother," the chieri said. It stretched out its long body on the green turf. "I suppose you have no patience with long tales, go I will say only this, Kennard-the chieri lived on Darkover long before you Terrans came, to drive us into the deep and deeper woods."

Kennard said, "But I am not Terran," and Larry felt his amazed anger. "Larry is the Terran!"

Thechieri smiled. "I forgot," he said gently, "that to your people, the passing of a lifetime is as a sleep and a sleep to our folk. Children of Terra are you both. I was here, a youngling of my people, when the first ship from Terra arrived, a lost ship and broken, and your people were forced to remain here. The time came when they forgot their origins; but the name they gave to this world-Darkover-indeed reflects their speech and their customs."

It was a strange tale he told, and Kennard and Larry, lying at ease and almost in disbelief, listened while the chieri told his tale.

The Terran ship had been one of the first early starships to cross space. Their crew, some hundred men and women, had been forced to remain, and after dozens of generations-which had seemed like only a little while to the chieri -folk-they had spread over most of the planet.

"There is a tale you spoke of," the chieri said, "of the lord of Carthon-one of your people, Kennard-who met with a woman of my folk Kierestelli; and she loved him, and bore him a son, and therewith she died, but the blood had mixed. And this son, Hastur, loved a maiden of your people, Cassilda, and from this admixture in their seven sons came the Seven Domains in which you take such pride."

Interbreeding to produce these new telepathic powers in greater intensity had led to seven pure strains of telepathy, each with its own Domain, or family; and each with its own kind of *oflaran*, or psi power.

"The Hasturs. The Aillards. The Ridenow. The Elhalyn. The Altons-your clan, young Kennard. And the Aldaran."

"The Aldaran," said Kennard with a trace of bitterness, "were exiled from the Comyn-and they sold our world to the Terrans!"

The chieri's beautiful face was strange. "You mean, when the Terrans came again, for the second time, the Aldaran first welcomed their long-forgotten brothers to their own people who had forgotten their ancestry," he said. "Perhaps among the Aldarans, their Terran heritage was never forgotten. But as for you, little son of Darkover and of Terra"-and he looked at Larry with great gentleness--"you are weary; you should sleep. Yet I know very well why you are in haste. Even now--" his face became distant--"Valdir Alton answers for your fate to these new Terrans who have also forgotten that these men of Darkover are their brothers. As, indeed, all folk are brothers, though there are many, many times when they forget it. And because you are both of my people, I will help you-though I would love to speak more to you. For I am old, and of a dying race. Our women bear no more children, and one day the chieri will be only a memory, living on only in the blood of those, their conquerers." He sighed. "Beautiful were our forests in those days. Yet time and change come to all men and all worlds, and you are right to speak with reverence of Kierestelli and to call Cassilda blessed, who first mingled blood with blood and thus assured that the chieri would survive in blood if never in memory. But I am old-I talk too much. I should act instead."

He got to his feet. With those strange gray eyes-eyes like the eyes of Lorill Hastur, Larry realized-he enspelled them both, until nothing but those gray eyes remained; space whirled away and reeled-

Bright hot light struck their eyes. Yellow light. They were standing on a brilliantly tiled floor in a brightly glassed-in room overlooking the spaceport of Darkover, and before them, in attitudes of defiance, stood Valdir Alton, Commander Reade-and Larry's father.