

Contents

# THE PRISM

**EMIL PETAJA**

ACE BOOKS, INC.  
1120 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, N.Y. 10036

Version 3.0

THE PRISM

Copyright ©, 1968, by Emil Petaja

All Rights Reserved

A portion of this novel appeared in *Worlds of Tomorrow* under the title *World of the Spectrum*, copyright ©, 1965, by Galaxy Publications, Inc.

*Cover by Jack Gaughan.*

Chapter I  
Chapter II  
Chapter III  
Chapter IV  
Chapter V  
Chapter VI  
Chapter VII  
Chapter VIII  
Chapter IX  
Chapter X  
Chapter XI  
Chapter XII  
Chapter XIII  
Chapter XIV  
Chapter XV  
Chapter XVI  
Chapter XVII

To

**Jack and Phoebe Gaughan**

## I

**Back to back**, Kor and Atlan of the Forests fought the Green Ones. Their serrated blades purloined light from the tropical dawn to dazzle the swamp creatures' eyes-on-sticks.

"I told you that the swamp path was folly," Atlan commented, thrusting steel into a green belly.

Kor showed even white teeth in a brown battle-tough face. "Then are the Seven Kingdoms for weaklings? Are the Forest Helden become skittish cave-skulkers? Speak, comrade!"

"Wait until I dispatch this big green bolo," Atlan panted. "There! I think we've routed them for the nonce."

"So." Kor nodded. The long claws of the swamp men dripped venom but the bronzed Helden of the Forests put their long blades to good use; presently the three Green Ones who didn't fall slithered off to sink back in their lairs under the swamp.

From the woodpath between the purple trees they watched the evil-smelling bubbles rise through the putrescent fen-mist where they sank.

Kor gave his great shoulders a shrug of good-riddance as he wiped the ichor from his blade on the wide leaves of a berry bush before sheathing it in the copper thrust at the side of his wide dragon-leather belt. Atlan grinned back at him. Kor's smile broke off when those voices started up again. They came from inside of his mind, abruptly, like a turned-on switch:

*"These heroic combats are not to my taste, but I suppose Tarzan-cum-Siegfried will always be popular with base-color. Anyone mind if I switch to something less obvious?"*

*"I'd like to follow Kor a little further."*

Chuckle. *"My daughter is young, Gold Dorff. She still finds muscles and a handsome face intriguing."*

*"We must indulge the child, by all means."*

Kor's weather-hard fight-hard face turned to stone, listening to such strange talk. It was not until Atlan flicked his fingertips across his biceps in a stinging slap that he snapped to.

"What gives, comrade Kor?" Atlan demanded. "Why are you standing there staring at nothing? Thinking of Liti, I wager?"

"No. Not of Liti."

Again Kor decided to say nothing. What would be the use? Atlan would laugh and begin to wonder if his boyhood buddy was beginning to slip. Sometimes Kor yearned back for the days when the two of them were boys and Liti their inevitable tagalong; golden afternoons and silky dawns when they swam the blue lagoons, fished the white-water streams, or hunted *selki* with crossbow and flinted arrow. No mind-voices to plague him. No questions to try answering when there were no answers to be had anywhere within the boundaries of their adventuresome Seven Kingdoms.

They walked along through the purple sun-dappled trees.

"Well?" Atlan demanded.

"I was thinking of the Princess."

Atlan's blue eyes danced. "So do all Helden youths. She is what keeps us fighting and yearning. But she is only a fantasy, a hapless dream!"

Kor made no comment; his long bared legs brushed aside fern fronds as they moved off the circuitous dragon's trail to rising ground and no trail at all. Their sandals made no sound on the sward; their hunt-stalk-fight-kill instructor had taught the two of them well. Had he not they would be dead

by now. Life was paced hot and fast among the Helden tribes of the Purple Forests and the devil took the hindmost. *Young.*

Mists of shimmering vapor shrugged off the night-wet as the tropical-close sun lifted into the heat of day; a sibilant wind sang through the natural flutes among the soaring swaying trees.

When they reached the diminished forest's rim and a wide upland clearing bisected the rearing tangle of verdure, they, could see the cliffs.

The cliffs! High as heaven itself. Unassailable, they were taught by the Care Women, even before their tough cranky fight-instructors took over. The cliffs were to dream on, a fanciful ever-fogged tableland which bespoke the unattainable, the forever unknown, a place to look up at with awed eyes and gaping mouth and wonder and never know or expect to know.

And now—just at this incredible moment!—the fog that never went away *did*. Briefly, so briefly that it must have been illusion. And there it was! The fabled castle of the Princess!

They stood there, gawking and gurgling.

Then it was gone.

Kor swallowed the thing that had leaped to his throat. "I—I never doubted it was there. We all worship the Princess and wear her banner on our hearts, yet not all of the Helden believe in her. But I did! Always! And now that I know she is real and I have seen her castle I'm going up there!"

Atlan cried out and slapped his shoulder in a plea for sanity. "Kor! Nobody has ever made it up that cliff! See how it beetles out! There are no holds. It's like polished flint. Forget it!" He added in a low growl, "I still think it was just an illusion. We dreamed it."

Kor took his hand. "Goodbye, friend."

"Hey! Not *now!*" Atlan cried. "Think on it! Let your brains struggle for sense!"

"Now is as good a time as any."

"What'll I tell Liti?"

"Tell her—" Kor shrugged; for a moment the must in his lake-blue eyes wavered. "Tell her I had to go. After all, this is our life, here in the Forests. To challenge. To fight. To die."

"But you're our leader, Kor!"

"You will lead, Atlan. Until I return."

"Return! You *know*—"

"Farewell, comrade."

Kor left Atlan scowling and blinking among the bracken; he did not look back.

\* \* \*

Questions seethed in his head while he moved out of the brush-spotted field and onto rocky terrain in the direction of the cliff-foot. It would take him the best of an hour to reach the scarp itself, and while his long legs carried him toward destiny and death his brain wrestled with a thousand strange thoughts—the kind of thoughts most of the Helden had no time for or rejected out of hand. Thoughts like: where did the people of Vicaria come from? Early in life he had seen the animals of the Forests give birth to their young. Not so the Helden, nor as far as he knew anything about it, did the peoples of the other Kingdoms. The Deevs. The albino cave-folk. The nightmarish Dracs. Or—Circe of the Palaces of Unendurable Pleasure. No. It wasn't like the mammals of the Purple Forests at all, suckling their

young and parentally training them in the arts of survival. With the Helden suddenly the children were *there*. No gestation periods among the women. No laboring. No final birth. They were suddenly there—a new crop of children for the Care Women to foster until it was time for the Teachers to take over and train them in predestined skills.

Helden life was of a heroic cast, rich with excitement, with danger; Helden heroes died young and while they lived it was always just on the sword's point of death from a thousand perils. Each day brought new hazards. So who had time for these questions and philosophical ponderings on the meaning of life when death was but a stone's throw away, leering, waiting, taunting?

Yet Kor *did* think. His nights were plagued with unwanted thoughts. Something inborn goaded him on. It was as if what had been washed clean from the minds of the rest had somehow slipped in his case. . . .

His thoughts and plaguings were all wrapped up in the Princess. He equated the mystery with the strange high castle in the forever-mist. The answer was up there. As for the Princess herself, Kor dared not think of her as for *him*. Such a thing was impossible. Yet it was from the Princess he would learn what she and he and the whole peaceless planet of Vicaria was all about.

Princess Sena was beautiful beyond description. Of course she was. Beautiful and unattainable. Every day's challenge was dedicated to the Princess. Had it not been the slimy Greens of this morning's battles, no doubt it would have been the fire-folk or the lurking white shadows of the caves or—worst of any—the blood-sucking Dracs who kept Helden herds to feed their young. And all for Princess Sena.

For Liti, too. Liti loved Kor and they were as good as bespoke. It was Liti Kor chose to sit beside him at the bardic fire-sings although, as strongest and bravest, Kor might have his choice. And Liti loved him. He was chieftain. He was beloved by a lissome and desirable maiden.

Wasn't that enough?

No.

Princess Sena was a myth to the others, a goddess to fight and die for. Her silver rose graced every Helden banner. But Kor . . . it had started months ago, the coalescing of what had been a boyish dream deep in his brain into a palpable reality. Mental, yes, but sometimes at night Kor *saw* the Princess! He would swear it, if only to himself! He saw her raven-black hair, her petal-soft face, her green-blue eyes. And she spoke to him. It was as though she had chosen Kor—out of all the warriors of all the Helden tribes—chosen him out of some urgent need for a hero who would perform some unimaginable task for her. And he must not fail her. He could not!

*"What a tedious procedure! He will climb the cliff halfway, then tumble to his death. Must we, Sena?"*

*"Just until he reaches the top, please?"*

*"But he won't make it. They never actually do get up to the castle; it's not compatible with the Legend. Right, Gold Dorff?"*

*"There might have been some recent revision for piquancy. We permit changes when the battle-to-the-death syndromes begin to bore even the base-colors. But these big-muscled Helden are a little too obvious for me. I leave them and their legend-gods to my assistants."*

*"Of course, Gold Dorff. Sena, we are boring our illustrious guest."*

*"Father—please? Pretty please?"*

\* \* \*

Climbing, Kor felt the warmth of her mind clinging to his, the way that his fingers reached out and clung to the projecting bits of rock-shard. He didn't understand. He never did. But the warmth was there, and behind it a compelling tug. "*Come, Kor! I need you!*"

There were times when the molecules of his body resented the whole thing, when the lithe cord-like muscles gave way and the entirety of his neural structure screamed for him to let go and die and be done with it. It was too much to take. He dared not look up or down either. It was some comfort to find himself actually within the shrouding fogs so that he couldn't tell how the cliff beetled out except by the unnatural tortures his back was enduring. The tendrils of wet fog cut the rivers of sweat, too. Miraculously his fingers found cracks; once, when his sandaled feet shot away and left him dangling he called out her name in prayerful invocation.

"*Kor!*" her mind called back across unguessable reaches. "*Hold on! I need you! You must not die!*"

He yelled out to defy gravity and when he could force away the petrifying fear that glued him against the rock and make himself move again, his floundering feet did find a mere toe-niche. He cried out again when, suddenly, the rock to which his fingertips clung gave way. When it seemed that the universe had run out of miracles his wildly flailing hands clawed up and *out*— and out was where they encountered roots like snakes, a musty tangle of earth and rope-like tendril. He grabbed, held, sobbed. His fingers inched upward, agonizingly slow between the slippings of wet clods and the blood-freezing times when dirt rained down in his face. But finally his frantic upgrips brought him to all-topsoil, to grass, and then his elbows walked up, crooked, and pivoted Kor around and to normal lateral being.

He lay there. He sobbed in great gulps of air. He clung against the planet as if it might teeter again and drop out from under him. Finally, he sat. Fog swirled moistly around him on every side so that first he could see nothing. Then he saw what made him scream-sob and leap away: the projection of clayey loam at the cliff's edge was giving under his weight.

He jumped wildly, grabbing for safe ground as the projecting headland snapped and fell.

Every muscle hurt. Every cell of his six-foot-six body screamed for oxygen, for sustenance, for exile from heroic duty. For a while that was all too brief he lay there, gulping in the thin windy air, denying the call that plagued him on. It was agony to wrench up on his feet, to force one foot ahead of the other, away from the cliffs edge. There was no telling which way would bring him to the castle's entrance, but for the moment he didn't much care.

He had made it! Nobody else had, ever. At least not within memory of the ancient song-stories told around the fires at night between flagons of beer and charred haunches of *selki* meat. Nobody! Triumph put a new edge on his stamina. His nerves and the death-release-wish within his mind was silent, stifled.

Yet, as life played itself on in the Purple Forests, triumph was all too transitory. First death came as a far-off bellow trumpeting in counterpoint across the skirling wind. Hearing that bellow stopped him cold. He waited, frozen. Then he saw it; it was monstrous, the largest dragon he had ever seen in his life. Scaled, low-bellied, it moved on him in rapid scuttled darts

of its webbed black hindfeet. When the wind drove the fog-curtain aside in a vagary Kor saw it full. On that tapering neck the red dragon's head surveyed him, savoring him with glowing eyes and slavering jaws, while its half-webbed foreclaws made coy preliminary snatches in his direction.

## II

*"An ancient dragon! How dull!"*

*"The base-colors love them. We keep them right out of the old legendry. One must have a dragon guarding a castle."*

*"I suppose one must. Our oaf is persistent and stubborn about refusing to die. I do hope he will show us the least bit of consideration and allow himself to be eaten at this point."*

*"Would that amuse you, Sena?"*

*"Oh, yes! I love it when they finally get mangled and devoured!"*

Kor snapped his head vigorously to shake off the buzzing voices; he gripped out his sword. The beast before him goggled and weaved its razor-toothed head, burbling anticipatory delight deep in its throat. It swished its broad fork-tipped tail as it contemplated such an unexpected morsel. With a trumpeting roar it came on full-charge.

The blast of its hot breath hurled Kor back toward the cliffline; his blade tore across the low-slung triangle of belly and made the dragon roar louder, and add a rageful scream of pain for a fillip ending. Kor's backleap tumbled him across a knoll and with a deft dip upward the dragon had him in its jaws.

*"Happy, Sena?"*

*"Ecstatic!"*

Kor screamed from blind pain, then his great body lopped and swung limply back and forth as the dragon turned ponderously and moved back toward some lair where he might relish and truly enjoy his unexpected feast. When the pressure of the cutting cuspids relaxed slightly, Kor gave a desperate lunge up—he drove his blade as hard as he could right into the roof of the great beast's mouth. The dragon's wide scream opened his mouth and that was what Kor was after. He dropped in a roll, heavily, on the thick blue grass. He bled in a dozen places. Life was a tangle of pain, but he must not fail Princess Sena now. He dropped flat and scuttled back between the beast's stumpy legs.

He ran.

He ran.

Blindly into the fog, anywhere away from those ravening jaws and away from the cliff. He ran in panic until the dragon's ragings were only an echo on the driving wind; then, only then, did he fling himself down on the ground and pull ragged breath into his starved lungs.

\* \* \*

Finally the fog came to an end. He called out silent prayers to the Princess for her boon. Her urgent reply inside his deepest brain cells gave him the resurgence of hero-power he needed to further his nagging self-demand.

*"Hurry, Kor! I am waiting!"*

Scrambling over a lichened hillock of rock he saw the castle, looming

close and palpable. A thrill raced through his veins. The castle was many-turreted and large, gray and black and mauve-shadowed where turret met forehall; it was tangled over with moss and vine. The portcullis was down, the drawbridge drawn up from a moat so ancient and unkempt that the water in it was a foul stagnance of green and brown slimes.

Kor sucked in deep from the altitudinal air; then, without further delay, he dove into the brackish scum. The water was cold as ice, as cold as the foretaste of death. He swam fast, sure-stroked from the lazy days in the lagoons of the Forest, then sought handholds in the slimes to scramble up rocks to the foretower's base. Hugging wall, he circled the vine-choked walk until he reached a weedy garden of dead flowers and rampant foliage; there was a small door, arched, where blunt entrance hall met tower, as if in days long gone the Princess and her handmaidens had used this door for a morning's dalliance in the flowerbeds.

The door was locked. Kor put his shoulder to it; hasps, locks, hinges—oxidized by brooding centuries of disuse—yielded to his second heave. The door popped inward with a noise that echoed and reechoed down the long corridors, halls where arachnids and rodents roamed and sullied at will. Kor waited there, heart sinking from portentous dread of what he might find inside. The eddies of dust made him cough, stepping across the door where motes spun and danced silent fandangos in vagrant light beams that fingered their way through the ever-fog. Ghosts were here and ghosts of ghosts.

He called out.

"Princess! Princess Sena!"

Echoes skittered back out of the dusty gloom. The voice in his mind was silent. Mocked by the echoes, he moved in and past the mailed sentries in heavy armor, toward the center of the great tower. The silence, the dark, the closeness—these were all heavy weights dragging his heels and urging him to quit this dead place. Once he touched a helmeted figure's breastplate to avoid a tangle of spider-web; the helmet rocked, then toppled off to the floor with a noisy metallic clank, revealing a white skull. Kor shivered and ran.

His footsteps were an outrage on the stillness. Staring around him at the stony circle, he saw that the central chamber was hung with tattered shreds of tapestries; gay hunting scenes and feasts mocked the dusty silence, faded, moldered by relentless years.

Kor's probing eyes dug the gloom, from the high elongated slots of window to the places where damp had encrusted the crumbled masonry with fungus. He moved quickly to the spiral of stone stairs leading up. . . .

He found her in the small topmost chamber at the summit of the winding stairs; her bed was four-postered silver, and the white satin of her gossamer bedcovering lay heavy with dust like animal fur. Yet Princess Sena herself was no skeleton; it was as though the dust-pall had not dared to touch the carved ivory and shell-tint of her face and her folded hands like doves.

Her beauty caught Kor's breath, then wrenched out a forlorn cry. Her carmine lips were curved in a sighing smile; her raven-black hair billowed over the satin pillow like a fan; under her delicately arched brows her eyes slept.

Kor bent to her and kissed her with impatient reverence. He had to. Touching her petaled cheek with his sunburned lips he pulled back with a second cry. Princess Sena was cold. Cold as death.

With a sob he dropped to his knees; he ached in every fiber and his nerves were like jelly. Dry blood darkened his brown Helden body. But it was his inner agony that defeated him. By some eldritch magic Princess Sena was forever young and beautiful—but, like the castle's servitors and all the rest, she was dead. Dead for centuries. The Legend was that and nothing more. Atlan was right!

He snapped shut his eyes not to see her. The beauty in her cameo of a face, in the curve of her throat and swelling breasts, all of it was a mockery. His dream was over.

A gibbering laugh from the tower's open window pulled him dully out of his dizzy defeat. He turned and saw them.

There were three of them. Three Dracs. Blood-drinkers from the Vales of Horror. Their black-mottled-with-scarlet faces grinned delightedly while they chattered glee. Only the Dracs, with their powerful bat wings, could attain the castle heights. But the Dracs were only quasi-human and of low intelligence. To them the Princess meant nothing. The Drac religion was of a different order altogether. The Dracs worshipped a strange non-dying creature whom they called Condracu of Transalvan: it had been Condracu who had exalted the piddling human organism into the immortal transcendental state of Drac-hood. To the Dracs Princess Sena was a wheyfaced nothing, without a drop of blood in her. Ugh!

But Kor. Here was something else again, something to make them chitter thanks to Condracu the Magnificent for a rich boon. They had sniffed him out on their morning rounds; incredible as it might seem to find a Helden from the Purple Forests up here—a muscular, huge brown creature whose heart even now pounded up a tempest of rich red blood through his arteries and veins!—here the spoor had led them, and here he was! Why, they could see the jugular's pulse hammering in his thick neck from where they lingered by the arch of window, drooling!

What a natural for their blood-herds! Why, such a virile creature should let seven pints a week! More, maybe!

Hero-taught as he was, Kor's reaction was purely involuntary. One died, but one died fighting. He edged back and pulled out steel. The Dracs gibbered between themselves, talons flexing, fangs adrool. Even while Kor's look flashed to the stairway door, which he'd left open, one of the blood-beasts anticipated him; it flapped across the chamber to cut him off from escape down the winding stone spring. Yet Kor's intricate amalgam of nerve and muscle responded to danger as it had been taught to by his harsh taskmaster. His blade went out, lashing wing-membrane, when the other two made their sudden attack.

Facing them, he saw a thousand near-deaths glittering in those agate-pink eyes before the final release from the horror. Stories of the chainings, the browsings for scant rations of a kind to make a Helden shudder, the stocks where they were pinned down while the young got first crack—all this flashed horribly across his mind.

He fought. His blade sang. Yet his heart was empty. Somehow what happened to him didn't matter in the least . . . now. The Princess was dead. There was no dream to battle for, no prize to win . . . nothing. He lashed out, but the bat-wings were agile animal creatures and while his sword busied itself on one—the other two were circling him about, harrying him with their talons, taunting him with their gleeful strident squealings.

Bone-weary from the prodigious climb and his battle with the dragon, Kor's stamina flagged. But it was despair that pinned him to the stone wall,



in the end. Cold arms like spiny rubber closed in, along with the flapping sail-like wings. Kor's sword clattered to the floor. He had one last mocking glimpse of Princess Sena's frozen smile of endless sleep before the floor dropped away and then the castle itself, lost in a blur of gray fog and mist like a winding sheet.

\* \* \*

Sena sighed. She reached languidly across her vid-couch for the off button. All at once the Dracs and the mist and the greatest of the Helden heroes, Kor of the Purple Forest—along with the scents, the tactiles, the chitterings and the flappings of the great black wings on the wind—all of this was erased and gone. An opalescence moved in as the walls of the livideo room defined themselves; they were sea-green and vaguely translucent as a suitable presage to Vicaria when the mood for sensual titillation came upon her and her aging parent.

Her father touched her arm fondly, indulgently. "Happy now, Sena? Your hero is suitably dead."

"Blissful." Sena yawned prettily. And she was pretty, too. Her hair was dark as a raven's wing. Her skin was palest ivory-gold with hints of roses at the high cheekbones, and red, red lips. Her eyes were not quite green, nor yet blue, but a lapis lazuli admixture of these and other swirling hues; they charmed Gold Dorff, jaded as he was, when she turned them on him and put on a girlish pout.

"But it is all such base-color nonsense, child!" Gold Dorff protested.

"I know it's base-color nonsense. But I love to see one of those storybook types get his. The Drac-chicks will drink hearty tonight."

Their fat guest, whose supernumerary chins and puffed eye pouches, along with his pendulous flabby arm-flesh and his mountainous middle, was pigmented gold, as were Sena and her father, Gold Ambon. He chuckled and tweaked the girl's cheek.

"And, if you wish to indulge your masochistic inclinations, you can continue to watch your hero—up to the bitter end. But, after I've gone, please!"

Sena giggled. "Gold Dorff, you're our greatest psychiatrist, aren't you? I mean, in the whole *world*?"

"I do have some reputation, I believe."

"Of course you are, silly! But you said if I watched Kor I would be *masochistic*! Didn't you mean *sadistic*? I mean, if I watched the little Drac kids suck the blood out of his neck and like that. I mean—" She batted her eyes and tittered helplessly.

"A semantic paradox," Gold Dorff rumbled. "We Golds are permitted to understand *why*, which is what makes us superior to the base-colors. Of course you are *sadistic*! All women are, more than men, actually. They love the sight of blood, and in the old days when their men went off to war, they loved every minute of it. And quite *properly*, too! What I meant by being *masochistic* is—how can you stand all that ridiculous guff, child? As a Gold, why bother? Kor and the Purple Forest, as well as his battles, are intended for base-color consumption, not for you, child."

Gold Ambon looked worried. "You mean Sena oughtn't—?"

Gold Dorff waved a plump hand. "Chht! Chht! If Sena gets some mingled satisfaction out of the more obvious Kingdoms, let her. After all, she's still a child."

"I'm eighteen!"

"Exactly. A child." His pinched eyes moved carefully over the lounging length of her slim curves. "As I was saying, women need the sadistic outlet and have always been more sensible about it than men, although they were equally sensible about not letting the men know it. The death-fight-sex parlay is perfectly normal. Livideo gives us all a vent for our completely natural urges, even the lesser breed—or should I say lesser *bred*?" He smiled at his cleverness. "Everyone, from Golds down to Blacks, needs fulfillment in all directions. And Vicaria provides it for all. So you see—my little kitten—those brainless oafs like Kor really do serve a very useful purpose by their existence."

"If one felt—umm—pity?"

Gold Dorff frowned. "That, of course, would be psychotic. These heroes and the creatures they battle perform a necessary function. And that is that. An outlet for our Own passions. Something for everybody within the Seven Kingdoms of Vicaria. Have you tried Circe and her Palaces of Unendurable Pleasure yet?"

"Father thinks I'm too young." Sena stretched out kittenishly and gave the white-haired man lying next to her a pettish toss. "We don't even have Sixth yet."

"Ah. The bypaths."

"Tell Father I've got to visit Circe! Tell him!"

The white-haired man patted her shoulder. "Next year, Sena." He turned to their important guest. "You mustn't mind Sena, Gold Dorff. I mean, her mentioning the sympathy syndrome. Of course she knows what Vicaria is all about and how it isn't only for entertainment. Sena's a perfectly healthy normal Gold."

"I can see that."

The old man's eyebrows met. "Gold Dorff, there is one thing."

"Yes?"

"These new Lech groups? I don't quite understand them. Are they all right? In my day—"

"Which was quite a while back." Gold Dorff laughed. "No. The Lechs are primarily for adolescent experimentation. Before even Golds settle down to Vicaria and the permissible sex life, they go through a period of adjustment and sex-ploation. After all, youngsters have to experiment. It's part of growing up. Why? Has Sena—?"

"Only three times." Sena giggled. "I had a ball."

Gold Dorff concealed his private wink from her father.

"But the drugs!"

"Nothing to worry yourself about, Gold Ambon. Teens must have their secret wickednesses to prove superiority to the old guard. Just so long as the Color Code is rigidly observed. The Color Code is of peak importance in our great society. His Goldness IX gives the Lechs his blessing, which surely is enough for parents and teeners alike."

The significance of his veiled look was not lost on Gold Ambon.

"Of course! Of course!" the old man said hastily. He lifted his right hand up, clenched fist and opened his fingers twice in rapid succession. Then, the middle finger jabbed the air straight up.

The Sign.

### III

**A Black moved** in silently at Gold Ambon's flustered beckon to refill their glasses of golden stimulant. No one paid him any more attention than if were part of the furniture until Gold Dorff crushed out his current cigarette on the back of the man's hand when the ashtray was not forthcoming as fast as needed. The Black made a small sound before backing quickly out of the room.

"Blacks don't feel pain, do they, Uncle Dorff?" Sena remarked.

"What difference if they do?" The illustrious one's eyes narrowed at the "Uncle," thoughtfully.

"They're like the ancient Negro slaves from China."

"Africa, child. No. Not a bit like them except for, of course, the coding. Oh, I suppose some dim vestige of identification lingered after the Racial Wars. But all that was such a long time ago and beyond the pale. No, Sena. Code Black for lowest class menials was selected by His Goldness simply because the color black is so distinctive. Like everyone else, Blacks are pigmented in code at birth. Before, actually, in the mech-decanters. Blacks are pigment-coded and conditioned for low-grade servants and subsequently non-educated and fed accordingly."

"His Goldness IX started the Prism Complex, didn't he, Uncle Dorff?" she asked, dimpling.

"Not exactly. His Goldness IX is our current World Head. The whole thing began with His Goldness I. And, as I implied, the Color Code has nothing whatever to do with ethnic groups or races. The Race Wars came centuries before. The Code has its basis in sociological and economic factors of our society. When it was finally admitted that mankind being created 'equal' was meaningless gibberish and the Judeo-Christian religion was scrapped along with all the others, His Goldness I freed mankind from muddlement and slavery by designing the Code Complex, popularly called the Prism, as it is where every human is coded at birth and conditioned through selective and deprivational feeding of body and mind toward his ultimate use in the world. He is coded at birth and must remain so until he dies."

"There have been some exceptions?" Gold Ambon ventured.

"A few. Marriage or quixotic inheritance sometimes causes an upgrading, but the pigment-change is so harrowingly painful that mostly it is rejected. In any case, His Goldness IX discourages all changes." He made the Sign perfunctorily as he hiked himself closer to the girl. "But surely you know all of this from your livideo lessons? Even a Gold enjoys cerebral endeavor of some kind!"

Gold Ambon clucked and patted his daughter's hand fondly. "I'm very much afraid that Sena is not very interested in her studies. I try but—"

"Chances are she needs a different teacher."

"The livideo lessons are so dull." Sena nodded. "And Father's the darling dear of the whole world but he is a bit prosy and—" Her lips brushed the old man's ear; her cute shrug was most expressive.

"I quite understand, child. Perhaps a few realistic lessons at my apartment?"

"Or at the Prism!" Sena cried. "I'm just dying to see all the wonderful things that go on in that enormous place! And, Uncle Dorff, you're just the one—"

"Not so fast, child," the fat man grimaced. "Virtually no outsiders are

permitted in the Complex. Even—even stu—innocent little kittens. Suppose you helio to my apartment tonight and. . .”

“Plow about a lesson right now, instead?” Gold Ambon countered. He wasn't happy with the way the wind was blowing; it might well blow his scatterbrained pride and joy right out of his life into a devious steel-encased milieu where such a child would be lost long before she was abandoned by someone as close to His Goldness IX as was Gold Dorff.

The head of the major Code Complex component shrugged and rustled his silks. “Very well. A preliminary brushup perhaps.” His eyes were on Sena's budding breasts. “You remember about the Race Wars which followed not long after the East-West divisional troubles?”

Sena simply smiled.

“No matter. Anyway, the world became among other things a hotbed of spies. There were spies everywhere. Nationalistic spies. Business spies. Spy spies. One couldn't go to the bathroom without being spied upon for a variety of reasons. It was finally determined that if everyone was color-coded, tattooed on his left shoulder besides, and this tattoo irrevocably coded to this individual's personal history in the Complex, all of this would be unnecessary. World citizens of every class were therefore color-coded and the tattoo relates and identifies him as the little cards he used to carry did in an earlier era. There is no way of changing the color, nor the tattoo. The officials who keep check carry simple flash-radios which instantly relay back all information on any given individual from the Code Banks. It takes only a split second. Every person of every Code is an open book.”

“You can't fight the Code, can you, Uncle Dorff?”

“Certainly not! It isn't even tried any more.”

“Tell me some more, Uncle Dorff.”

The fat man preened and hunched closer. “We Golds are the highest, as you know. We control the Prism. While robots do most of the work, His Goldness IX deems it best to keep up a good supply of lessers, base-colors, to keep the world functioning in orderly fashion. His Goldness IX is very magnanimous; most of them could be easily eliminated if he chose to do so.”

“Blues are second to Golds, aren't they?”

“In that they are most cerebral, yes. They do the think-work which the robots can't do. They control the robots and keep all the giant machines running smoothly. They are the mechs.”

“How about Reds and Greens?”

“Reds are educators. Greens relate to food produce and anything involving commerce. The fourth Code group are the Varigates. The artists.”

Sena ran a pink tongue across her red lips. “I think if I weren't a Gold I'd like to be Varigate. Artists can be wacky and weird and do anything they like.”

Gold Dorff smiled thinly. “You are such a child. Of course they can't do any such thing. The Varigates live so-called 'bohemian' lives seemingly, but in practice they function within as narrow a circle as anybody else. They paint and sculpt or compose music, true, but even this has been predetermined by early controlled environment and training. They can deviate among themselves sexually if they like; who cares? But they must stay within strict Code. The Code is above all!” He made the Sign, roguishly completing it in Sena's direction.

“Browns and Blacks are servants.”

Gold Dorff grimaced. "Browns are permitted some license in their private lives and perform such trained but simple tasks as chauffering aircabs and so on."

"And Blacks are—"

"Tiresome." Gold Dorff yawned. "Can't we move to another subject, kitten?"

Sena was cutely thoughtful for a moment.

"What if—"

"Yes?"

"What if some crazy fool says—to hell with it?" Her father clucked a protest, but Gold Dorff laughed and patted her arm. "Never mind, Gold Ambon. I'm delighted to hear rebellion even hinted at, after so long a time. Sena, child, that is where I come in."

"Psychiatry?"

"Exactly. If a person shows disturbing symptoms he is plainly scrambled inside. Inside of his mind. His pattern has been maladjusted by some kind of trauma or other. So what do I do? I remove such a person to a hospital and probe him carefully before unscrambling his mind."

"What if you can't unscramble him?"

"Then off he is shipped to a psych-farm."

"What happens there?"

"Never mind."

Sena sighed dreamily, then trilled a bird's laugh. "Babies are all born in the Prism hospitals, aren't they, Uncle Dorff?"

"So that they can be coded, yes. Then, even before birth, the training begins. Since they are destined to function within a given environment all of their lives, their thalamic consciousness is conditioned to be content there and nowhere else."

"Like Pavlov's dogs."

"Yes—" He shot her a cocked look. "Where did you hear about that? Pavlov isn't contoured to livideo, even for Golds."

Sena giggled. "I think it was at a Lech party. They get really wicked sometimes, the sillies!"

"I might have mentioned it, Gold Dorff." Gold Ambon defended.

"You?"

"I'm old, old, old. As you pointed out. I have more than ten years on you, Gold Dorff."

"Um."

"Tell me about Vicaria," Sena exclaimed, waving her pink hands. "Tell me where you get those darling hunks of beefcake like Kor!"

Diverted by her limpid eyes, the psychiatrist moved into the area which was really his main area of endeavor. "Vicaria. Yes. A planet in the Proxima Centauri system. Tropical for the most part, but ideal for the uses which His Goldness V first made of it. . . ."

## IV

**Kor lifted himself** hurtfully from the rancid straw onto which he had been flung, as far as the lianae-chain that chafed and numbed his ankles would permit. His wrists were bound behind him with the same pungent vines; by now the tips of his fingers were without any feeling and the circulation throughout his giant body was sluggish. Before leaving him, one of the

Dracs had slugged him, to stop his thrashing about in his livestock stall.

It was dark here in the blood-herd's barn, but he detected movement in the other narrow stalls from other captives like himself. Judging from the feebleness of the moans and dragging of limbs, many were in their last throes of desperate, futile resistance. After all, the Helden were born and conditioned fighters; even in the dreaded Valley of Horror, with no hope whatever, they must yet resist to the last convulsive leap of nerve and muscle. For out there among the stars, the childish stories of the Care Women suggested, Watch-Gods were constantly sensing every move they made, every single heartbeat, every nuance; and these Watch-Gods would be hurt and angry if each Helden and Deev and Circe did not fulfill his destiny to the utmost.

Kor strained his ropish muscles; he did everything he could think of in the way of acrobatic twisting to free himself. But it was useless. He knew the aromatic lianae roots the Dracs had bound him with. A most versatile root, it was employed for thonging together Forest huts, fences, captives; its tensile strength was beyond most metals the weaponmakers mined in the caves of cliffs and hammered into utilitarian shapes. Except for tempered steel and—Kor could still hear the descending clatter of his prideful blade as it struck the cold stones of Princess Sena's tower chamber.

Princess Sena.

"Princess!" he moaned out loud into the sour dark. "I did what you asked me to! I climbed up to the castle. I came to you, but there you were—" He couldn't speak the dreadful word, only think it. And the thought itself was agony. His heart was in limbo about it. All those years. All those sleepless nights, those dreams cherished in secret. All adolescent fancy. Well, Princess Sena might have truly lived—once upon a time. But now she was Legend indeed and his quest had ended in nothing.

Hoping beyond hope, he tried again. He called her name savagely into the blackness, out of a throat constricted by thirst and despair.

Nothing. Still he waited. Then he got his answer, but from the stall next to him to the left.

The whisper was rasped out of a tortured throat. "Who are you? Hey, in there—New One!"

Kor pulled in air. "Kor. My name is Kor of the Purple Forest."

"Aye. I know the Purple. Thick and filled with game. I am Lafe. I come from the bleak North Coasts of Ainsea."

"Wild country up there."

"Aye. Yet it suits us somehow. In our bones. We wonder why, but we stay." A pause, then a bitter spill of laugh. "I remember fighting your tribe once. Aye. A long boat's pull to do battle and I can't remember why—"

"Nor I, Lafe. The usual woman-napping expedition, no doubt. Not that there is any reason why I should, but I don't recall your name. The raid-battles, yes. But the name, Lafe, no. Tell me; how did the Dracs get you and how long have you been here in this foul stable?" There was comfort to the sound of a Helden voice. It wasn't his comrade, Atlan, nor Liti, his little fish, yet—enemy or not—they were both in the same hell's pot.

Silence. Lafe's throat must hurt him fiercely, and not much blood was left to seep out from the countless drainings, but he forced out words. They helped him, too. "As for how they got me," he mumbled weakly, "we were on the hunt for winter provisions. I wandered out stupidly beyond the stockade and the bivouac—"

"At night?"

"Aye. At night. I heard something wailing, like it might be a lost child. Twas—"

"A Mocker!"

"Aye. Those filthy burrowing rodents work hand in mitten with the bloodsuckers themselves! Mockers are scavengers and get the leavings when the youngbuck Dracs run amok after a blood famine. Mockers can imitate anything and well I knew. But like a muckleheaded fool—"

"When? How long ago?"

"How long?" A raw gibber of laughter stung the stale air. "I used to be able to keep track, before the faints started. Thought I'd last longer if I kept my brains in one piece, like most captives of the bloodsuckers don't. But no more!"

Kor's jaw went tight. "You've—fed them often?"

"Often! Watch-Gods bear witness! First off it wasn't so bad that I couldn't at least bear it. The pricks and the slurping came to be routine. I was big and strong then, Kor of the Purple. I was put in prime stock—here—and by a miracle I'm still here. But not for long. Not now. . ."

Kor shuddered, yearning to close his ears to Lafe's wretched story yet steeling himself to learn what he was up against. He had to know, to learn; in any case Lafe's agony was spurting out in a fountain.

"The Dracs rate us the way the hillfolk rate their nanny goats. By quality and roe-gut bucketful. Three-infant. Four-infant. Five. I was five and even six, sometimes, my first weeks in this hole of horror. Now I'm lucky to stay three, and instead of babies I feed the elders, greedy snagless crones who have to have the throat-prick done for them and even their claws break off from brittleness."

Kor shivered. "You tried escape?"

"There's none, Kor. None, none." The sound was a low moan of air. "Don't think they don't all try. Helden *have* to try, you know that. We all crack our brains wide open figuring how and sometimes we do, too. I was with three breakouts. We never got far."

"Why not?"

"Don't you know, Kor? This barranca is surrounded by sky-high mountains. Only the Dracs themselves can get in and out—by flying. Ever since I was brought here I have heard whispery stories about lost crevices and tunnels that lead out into decent country, but it's my belief the Dracs make 'em up so we won't all give up and die on them. The Drac-chicks can't make it over the cliffs; wings aren't strong enough. Old ones can't, either. They don't care about the old ones; sometimes they have a late summer's festival to Condracu where they drain their old ones off and heave 'em into a pit. But the children—"

"I know," Kor said. "The first law of the Seven Kingdoms is that new blood must be cherished so that the tribe will not dwindle off and die. The Watch-Gods give us each new life and each infant is a holy thing." He strained to move his fingers and toes, to bring back life to them. An unformed thought leaped into being in his brain, roweling in something like hope. "What about the Care Women here?"

"I know nothing of these things. It is forbidden, Kor."

"So what, Lafe? Haven't you even wondered where the babies the gods send us come from?"

"It is forbidden to wonder."

"I know, Lafe. But think! Where the babies come from *might prove a*

*means of our escape!"*

\* \* \*

"Vicaria! Ah, Vicaria! His Goldness V's pride and joy!"

Sena's laugh was a bird-trill of buoyant *joi de vivre*. "I'm so glad he fixed up Vicaria for us. It's such fun titilling with all those funny creatures!"

Gold Dorff stared at her curves with indulgent eyes; he forced away the twisted smile at such moronic commentary on His Goldness' method of enslaving his planet.

"Vicaria developed out of early video, which developed out of a one-track aural titill called *radio*."

"How quaint."

"Indeed. The ancients entertained themselves with what they called 'plays,' identifying with the lead characters; these plays were contrived by Varigates of the era and acted out by Varigate performers who were trained to make them as realistic as possible. Of course none of this was really satisfying."

"I should think not. Hearing. Seeing. No titill!"

"As you say. No neural stimulation. For one thing they were often so transparent in story line that you could guess the ending. As a major Prism Head I have been permitted to peruse some of the forbidden books and while a few have a curious fascination their titill-value is practically nil. Whereas with Vicaria and the Seven Kingdoms the identification is virtually total. The Seven Kingdoms provide every possible variety of titill adventure from bloody battle to subtle erotic bedplay. And nobody can guess the ending because the adventures are random. The heroes are designed to be heroic; the villains to be menacing. Beyond this anything can happen. If the hero has not learned his instruction well, he dies. Villainy triumphs. There is something for everybody; everybody's titill-capacity has been considered. Further, one doesn't have to wait very long for action. The heroes are forever battling each other or monsters, and Circe's nymphs are forever—"

"Ah, ah." Gold Ambon wagged a finger. "Next year!"

"Really, Father, you are an old fud. I'm *eighteen!*"

"Not quite, dear."

"Next to." Sena swung her long bare legs around so that they all but touched Gold Dorff's. "When I snap on my livideo here the walls disappear and it's like I am on Vicaria. My emotions and every nerve in my body is titilled all at once! When those fascinating creatures fight or make love or suffer, I do, too!"

"To the correct proportion, naturally. We keep well within the threshold of actual pain. We don't want to be harrowed, now. And most of the cerebrals are eliminated."

"Cerebrals, Uncle Dorff?"

"The mental gyrations. We discourage abstract or philosophical thinking in the Kingdoms. Vicaria was not designed to teach. Only to keep the populace happy and satisfied with their lot. Thinking is out, on both ends."

"We're like—like children!" Sena tittered and clapped her hands.

"Aren't we!" Uncle Dorff's eyebrow tilted. "As I said, we don't want our Vicarites getting ideas or wasting their time brooding. They might even—"

"Even—?"

"Never mind, child."

Sena's sea-strange eyes stormed up thoughtfully, but immediately the



storm abated in a beaming smile. "The tactiles are hid in the livideo couches, aren't they, Uncle Dorff?"

The fat man chuckled. "No more. No. The couches are used to induce a sleeplike condition which facilitates titill. Perhaps in your father's youth the neural contacts were concealed in these pneumatic chaises but not within the past twenty years or so. A clever Blue named Jason Jones invented a kind of neural short-band radio to do the same thing, only much better. No. It's all done by electronic impulses which are instantly superimposed on our nerve cells. Deep ident, we call it. Every cell of the body is involved, so you can see how complicated it is and how clever Blue Jason Jones was to have thought it up. Certain areas of the brain are blocked off, of course."

"Why, Uncle Dorff?"

"Never mind."

"Oh. And even the low-caste Blacks—"

"No. The deeper subtleties are reserved for Golds and to some extent Blues and Greens. The more obvious animal titill satisfies the others."

Sena stifled a cute yawn. She wiggled up smoothly to Gold Dorff's pudgy arm and lit him another syntho-juana cigarette. She walked two pink fingers up the length of his arm, ignoring her father's cough.

"Uncle Dorff."

"Yes?"

"Where do they come from?"

"The Kingdoms creatures, you mean?"

Sena nodded widely. "Kor and all that. I mean, are they decanted from the birth bottles up there on that other planet? They don't seem to have any machines of any kind on Vicaria. They're awfully primitive."

"Yes. I mean—no, they are not decanted on Vicaria." He brushed close to her raven's wing hair when he sorted his bulk together and stood up. "I must leave you now, child. I have stayed far too long. Gold Ambon, my thanks to you—and to you, charming child—for a most interesting interlude in the tedium."

Sena snaked herself up with him, standing close to him, pouting. "I'm sorry you have to leave so soon, Uncle Dorff. I just *love* listening to you. You must be the most brilliant man in the whole wide world."

Gold Dorff chuckled and patted her creamy-gold shoulder.

"Yes you are, Uncle Dorff! I just know it's *you* who manufactures those marvelous synthetic hunks of beefcake in your great big laboratory in the Prism and—"

"They are not synthetic, child."

"No?"

"No. They are quite human."

Sena gasped. "For Goldness sakes! And I thought from the lavish way you let them get killed off that *surely*—"

"I really have to be off, child." Regretfully, he removed her clinging arms from his flamboyant silks. "We'll talk about it next time."

"At the Prism?" Sena was ecstatic. "I just *must* see how you manage to create those fun-titills, I just *must*! Now don't forget, Uncle Dorff! Soon?"

The Prism Head permitted a Black to adjust his gold-flecked cloak over his tunic and smiled down in the direction of Sena's breathless bosom.

"Perhaps."

"Promise?" she called after him.

Her answer was a fast leer.

## V

**Kor lay silent** and uncomfortable on the acrid straw of his stall, sleepless, thoughtful. Life of the wild North Coast clans had moaned himself into a faint, or else Kor's awesome references to taboo subjects had withdrawn him into a shell of misery; the childish fright which the Care Women had inspired of the omnipresent Watch-Gods could do that. Even death by Dracs was preferable to what could happen if he displeased the Watch-Gods.

Kor worried his mind in every direction.

Where did Helden babies come from? Where did Drac babies come from? Why didn't the women of the Helden tribes give birth to them as the animals in the Purple Forest did? Even the dragons laid great eggs and hatched out their young from them. Yet the Helden (and presumably all other human-types within the Kingdoms) replaced their battle victims by mysterious religio-magico rites attended only by the Care Women, who themselves were mysterious and sacrosanct. You must never dream of returning to the Care Women's quarters behind the high fence, never. You not only never go back, once the age of training has been reached, but you don't even *think* about it. The past is a closed book, a slammed door, an unscalable wall. Don't look back. Not ever! The Care Women are to become shadowy amorphous figures representing only bosomy warmth and comforting omniscience. You are permitted to vaguely equate them with cloudish thoughts about the Watch-Gods and happy thoughts of going back out into the stars when you are dead. As for the future, that was it. Death and return to the stars. And it might come any day—today—if you are not very, very heroic and very, very skillful in your trained valiance.

But the babies? Where *did* they come from in the beginning? Where?

His mind cried out impulsively for Princess Sena to help him. He waited for voices but there were no voices. How could there be any? Princess Sena was dead! He had seen her dead and the farce was over. Did not this prove that something was wrong inside of his brain? And if he was sick in the head did this not prove that *all* of his thoughts about babies and his own "specialness" were rubbish? Different, pah! Everybody had his moments of exalted ego; everybody was "special."

He groaned.

Let the Dracs take him. Better yet find some way to kill himself before the humiliation of that first fang-bite. A long, time ago he had vowed to himself that however he got it it would not be *that* way. He'd die clean, sword in hand, battling impossible odds. That was how a hero died. But he had no sword and the Dracs didn't play it like that. . . .

Yet suicide as a way out was as repulsive. Untenable. Not only was it the second strictest taboo of all the Kingdoms, but the very suggestion of it stuck in his craw worse than the draining-death.

There was only one answer to his problem. He must make a break, try to escape. If Lafe or any of the others joined him, well and good. If not, he would do it alone. His bid for escape would fail; there was no chance. But he would do something that would cause the Dracs to kill him instantly. Indirect suicide, it might well be, but life was all made up of compromises.

He slept out of pure exhaustion, finally, and the passing out was shattered by the slamming of the great front doors of the stock barn and the grumbling chitter of herdkeepers. It was morning. The Drac children were hungry. Growing children get hungry early and eat often.

Kor's muscles pulled tight while he listened to the dry squeaking of vine-thongs and the lurching thud as bodies were yanked up on their feet down the long line of stalls. His heart hammered into his throat. Something basic within him shriveled up while he waited and listened to the feeble moans of the other human cattle. The drying lianae had bit down near the bone during his sleep but he managed by wrenching degrees to claw up on his feet. At least he would face them full, not cower and be dragged doomward. He thought bitterly: *at least for the first time*. All of those gaunt blood-cattle had once faced their captors with the same kind of bravado; he was no different than they. Getting his blood drained twice a day would soon bring him to his knees. The brain cells needed blood, too; deprivation would presently kill the bravest hero's spirit.

He shrugged off the claws that hustled him out of his stall, after slashing free his ankle thongs. He was surprised, first, that the talons were blunt; they didn't cut into his brown hide as those of the prowling hunters had. Then he knew. The claws had been cut; naturally the herdkeepers were picked for size and ferocity, and well-fed. But they must not draw blood. Blood was precious, every drop of it; it was not to be carelessly spilled on the barn floor. It was for the kiddies, first, then for everyone in the village, each in his turn.

The faces Kor saw limned by the turgid stir of morning light from the wide-open door were gray and hopeless. But once this double row of emaciated head-droopers had been fiercely proud Helden. Where once they had strode forest and field, wary but proud, now they shuffled with dragging feet toward the detestable dawn which meant breakfast—as before—only now *they* were breakfast.

Kor blinked around him.

This Drac village, like a hundred others, rested on a half-round plateau that clung to the sheer side of this devil's barranca. The cragged cliffs reached up so high and narrow on both sides of the clutch of stone and straw huts the Dracs called home that only a faint rivulet of sky was visible and that blurred by sullen fog. No wonder Lafe and the other blood-cattle gave up. One look at the fortress cliffs surrounding the village and the central community-cafeteria compound was enough to defeat the best-trained hero and chill his blood. There was no sign of cave or crevice beyond the circle of houses. All was rock and more rock.

A shrill chitter and a body slam kept him moving.

Kor turned his attention to the breakfast setup.

The compound was round, like a boardinghouse dining table; and the circumference of the great circle was a sea of fanged faces. Black and red mottled faces with glowing leprous-white eyes. Waiting. Hungrily watching the ragged double line of lurching, coughing, puking food. At the center of the compound was a triple row of T-shape crosses, chipped from cliff rock and set with crude iron manacles at base and at the T-arms. The Dracs were only quasi-human—there was much beast in them—yet they were intelligent enough to smelt iron and beat it into ironwork racks to hold down the strongest Helden during draining. As for weapons, they needed none, with those ravening claws and sharp fangs. And their powerful black wings carried them swiftly away from ground dangers. Yet, the bleeders must be immobilized if the babies and children were to drink in comfort and they had no way of keeping the sustaining nutrient they lived on wholesome and fresh, save in its original container.

The figure ahead of Kor coughed and hacked; now it reeled back so that

Kor grabbed him from falling in a heap of bones. The deep blue eyes showed lingering defiance.

"Lafe?" Kor whispered.

The hollow-cheeked figure nodded. Kor studied him in one inclusive sweep. Lafe was tall, towheaded, bearded like the others, and like the others the ragged matting of hair had been scraped clean at a new purple mouth in the side of his neck. Yet there was a vestige of pride left in Lafe of the North Coast; the wheat-hued hair was like lifeless dust now and the skin hung in gnarls on his big bones, but it was in the fierce furtive darting of those blue eyes that manhood stubbornly persisted.

"Lafe!" Kor said urgently.

"Yes, Kor."

"Are you with me? Will you try?"

The mouth gave a bitter wrench. "Try what?"

"What we talked about last night!"

"I don't—"

A vicious backhand slap smashed away Lafe's uncertainty; Kor got his, too. The violent whiplash hurled him against the ground and bent the rest of the row like reeds in a gale. The herdkeep straddled Kor ominously; his barrage of chattering communicated itself across the lines of Helden; if they didn't understand the peculiar batlike Drac idiom its inference was enough to bring cringes and moans. If their blood must be sucked out of them let it be done without gratuitous violence; they hadn't the heart left for it. They shuffled dispiritedly; only one newer blood-bull yelled out encouragement to Kor. Mostly they gaped listlessly, weary of anything beyond the need for food and rest.

Kor flashed his eyes up at the fanged face drooling over him. He framed a grin. He wanted to thank the Drac for that slug. The blow did a lot for him. It sent glandular fire spinning through his blood. It coated his brain with icy decision. If there was a way out of this hell's cafeteria, he would damn well find it. Even his numb fingers and ankles, where the vines had been cut to allow movement, took on spurts of new life.

He wanted to act now. *Now*. But now was not right. All of the herdkeeps were on the alert. At the perimeter of the circle, among the waiting mama Dracs and their babies-in-arms, the warrior hunters were pricking up their pointed ears in his direction.

Wait. . .

\* \* \*

"Wait, Sena. I must talk to you."

Sena, sheathed in skintight gold that shimmered and caught the light of the fountain of colored water that glowed and cascaded at the center of their lavish gardened penthouse, stopped tripping upramp to her own room, turned. She grimaced down at him where his golden sandals paced the mosaic.

"Daddy, I'm in a hurry. I have to dress and run. It's past two in the morning."

"Dress? For what?"

"Never mind."

"Where are you going at this hour, child?"

"Out."

"Where out?"

"Don't be such a parent," Sena puffed. "I'm eighteen."

"Not quite." Gold Ambon moved to the ramp and drew her into the scintillating folds of his robe as if to shield her from all harm. "I am the only parent you have ever had, unhappily." He produced a loud sigh. "Sena, you must not encourage Gold Dorff! You must not do it!"

"*You* invited him," she pointed out.

"He invited himself after you made eyes at him at the trustees' banquet. I ought never have let you come with me to the annual Golds' meet."

"I'm not some kind of a weird princess to be kept in an ivory tower." Sena pouted. "Anyway, I'm a Gold, too. I have a vote—"

"Only after I'm gone. Oh, I know that won't be long. That's what I'm so worried about!" He shrugged tiredly. "As far as the vote goes, it means nothing. The banquet of Prism trustees is an anachronistic formality. We're never allowed inside and everything we vote on is prearranged. We don't know what goes on—just what we're told and that's not much." His eyes clouded. "I doubt if any one of the Golds has the knowledge or the acumen to vote no to anything new that Gold Dorff proposes, even if he wanted to."

Sena brushed his cheek with her lips. "Don't worry about me, Daddy. I'm not about to let Fatso do anything to me. I just want to see what it's like inside of the Prism!"

"Why on earth, child?"

Sena giggled. "Curiosity, silly!"

"Curiosity can kill fuzzy little kittens, same as big hairy cats. Even if you were the—the cerebral kind of girl, Gold forbid—"

"Haven't you ever wondered about the Prism and His Goldness IX? Haven't you, Daddy?"

"I suppose once. But I gave off wondering a long, long time ago. What's the point?" His jowls shivered. "Nobody ever sees His Goldness. You know that, child. Nobody. Sometimes I think that's a good thing. . . ."

Sena cocked her head cutely. "Well, I'm going to!" She told the world in a musical shout, "I'm going to visit him in his secret apartment in the Prism and I'm going to have cocktails with him! If it's the last thing I do!"

"Shhh! Don't say such things, child. Even if they are kittenish little jokes. One doesn't make jokes about His Goldness."

"Why not? Our house isn't bugged, is it?"

"Of course not. That sort of monitoring is archaic and unnecessary. You heard Gold Dorff. Even the barracks of the base-colors don't have to be monitored, much less the Golds. We are all too easily identified by Prism computer banks. Our world has at long last reached Nirvana. Dissension against the Prism and His Goldness is impossible."

The frown in Sena's aquamarine eyes deepened before she whisked it away with a brush of dark bangs. "Besides being impossible—why on earth would anybody bother? Who would want to rebel when everybody has everything he could possibly need? We all have Vicaria for titills! In fact, why do you even mention such a thing, Daddy?"

Gold Ambon's time-etched face showed confusion.

"I—I don't know why. Except that I want to keep you out of Gold Dorff's clutches before it's too late. He is powerful and he is—sinister. He plays devious games and he is utterly ruthless. Furthermore, he's close to His Goldness IX and can have just about anything he wants."

"Well, he better not want me." Sena brushed her lips against a shaggy gold-flecked eyebrow before dancing away up the ramp. Gold Ambon

stopped her at the top.

"Sena."

"Now what?" she said, pouting.

"You said you were going out. Not to another of those Lech parties? Do your Daddy a favor and—"

"Oh, don't be such a fusser." Sena trilled a laugh. "It's awfully late for you to be up, Daddy. Go to bed and stop your worrying about me. Nobody can make me do anything I darn well don't want to. I'm pure unadulterated Gold, remember?"

She watched him paddle away, wagging his head, until he vanished through an archway to the portico leading to his sleep chamber. She sighed and turned. Then, giggling, she changed her mind and ran back down on kitten's feet—back into the livideo room.

\* \* \*

Kor watched the herdkeeps propel their captives up onto the square cross-bases, one after another, slashing the vines that bound their hands behind them, first. While one lifted up the half-dead arms, another clanked shut the manacles. Now the ankles. The pin inserts were checked carefully.

Kor's eyes were held by the dull glints of those vine-cutting knives which each herdkeep wore on a vine belt with his short drover's quirt. Kor watched and moved whenever a quirt flicked his shoulders. His look moved from the drovers and their quirts, behind the crosses, to the warrior-hunters lounging at the borders of the great circle where all those greedy mouths and eyes were waiting. Back further, behind the stone houses, to the blank wall of rock. His glance swung over to describe a sixty degree arc; at the opposite side of the circle where the houses ended was a sheer drop. That was where they pushed over the oldsters when they'd had it. Above the compound was rock and more rock, with only the merest slit of sky between.

Like Lafe said, hopeless.

## VI

**Kor's eyes** clung to the vine-cutter's knife. It slashed expertly, methodically, down between each Helden captive's shoulder blades to snap off his bonds so that the positioner could stretch out the arms and manacle them to the cross-pieces. One after one. When they were all crucified the feeding would begin. It was simple routine.

The arms invariably hung limp after they were freed, except for that one. The uselessness of any kind of protest had been impressed upon the blood-cattle several ways. Being denied one's daily ration of sustenance was one. Seeing others whipped into insensibility was another. When a Helden persisted in battling the inevitable, out of mental unhinging, he was beat unconscious and pounced on, drained dry, then flung into the gorge. This sight served to keep the others in line quite a while. Be docile and you will survive!

Evidently the planetary hunters had not done so well in recent weeks. Kor got many lip-smacking looks from the ring of drooling watchers. Kor was fresh, tempting, strong—a gourmet's delight.

Time was running out fast.

Kor lurched himself into Lafe's shoulder and whispered, "Lafe! We've got to try!"

His answer was a brittling of the sagging frame.

"Try?"

"We're Helden! Heroes! Remember?"

His answer was a grisly choking laugh.

"Lafe, think! This is probably your last chance. Next time around you won't have the strength to try."

"I have tried."

"I know. But this time—" The herdkeep's quirt stung Kor's back; there was a clattering demand for silence.

Yet, it was nominal. The potential for concerted rebellion was already over. When the blood-herds did try anything, it was first thing after being dragged from their stalls, having concocted some desperate plan among themselves during the night. Now, the cattle were practically all ready for the morning feeding. From the sidelines the restless populace communicated their hungry impatience with murmurous chitterings.

The line shortened.

"Lafe! I *have a plan!*" It was a lie, but he had to snag the Northman's enfeebled spirit somehow. Two of them would increase his hopeful insanity. One couldn't even get started.

Lafe stopped, turned. "Kor, I am sorry. Farewell!"

"Get the knife!" Kor grated.

The vine-blade swept down.

"Your hands are free—*get it!*"

His foot swung up, shoved Lafe toward the Drac with the vine-knife. There must have been some spark of fight left in the Northman and the new comradeship prompted his wild grab. While the cutter moved back, and an instant before the positioner could take charge of Lafe and pin him on his crucifix, Lafe's arm jerked up zombie-like and wrestled away the knife. When the shiny shape all but slid away from Lafe's numbed fingers, Kor yelled: "Hang on! Cut me loose!"

There was a split moment of breathless shock before the clattering started in; Kor used the silent spot to ram his knee up into the positioner's groin. Lafe fumbled around and went to work on Kor's thongs. The first two awkward swipes were ineffectual; moaning prayers to the gods, Lafe put both shaking hands to the task. Kor strained hard, yanking apart the last shreds of the glutinous lianae. The captive behind them, an emaciated ancient with bulging eyes, surprised him by pushing his way into the rash of claws and fists. His hands were bound but his action helped.

Kor sent his freed fist into the positioner's fanged face, dropping him. But the cutter now had Lafe from behind and others were flapping up in a hurry. From the fringe-ring warrior-hunters saw the skirmish and half-flew to cut short this rash impertinence on the part of the new bull. There were spates of hubbub at the breakfast lineup but evidently the Drac colony was reassured that this interruption in the feeding was momentary and all would soon be put back in order.

"Catch!"

Before he went under Lafe tossed Kor the knife. Kor barely caught it and lashed back a herdkeep. He glimpsed a twist of mingled emotion on Lafe's face as the herdkeeps enveloped him with whips and blades and fangs. Lafe's expression reflected a kind of serenity of satisfaction: he was dying for a reason, a hero's reason.

Kor jumped back away from claws and knives, whipping his weapon in wide zigzags to keep back the converging Drac horde. A fountain of battle-thrill moved through his giant frame. There were at least a dozen herdkeeps and warriors harrying him at this point, and more coming, but numbers did not matter. If Atlan were here! What a time the two of them, swords in hands, would give these mottle-faced devils! Die, certainly . . . but there was meaning in such dying. The instructors had assured him of the fact and of continuance thereafter, somewhere among the stars. But you had to earn it.

The Dracs closed in.

*Kor! Behind you!*

Her voice. Inside his mind, as before. She had come back! And to help him!

He swiveled; he caught the first of three warriors full in his barrel chest in a savage up-rip. The Drac fell, his bat-ribbed wings closing upon him like a folding umbrella as he crumpled.

The others held back a moment.

"Princess!" Kor shouted his happiness aloud. "You are not dead!"

*No, Kor. I am not dead. The figure in the tower was a mock—a wax representation to complete the Legend. I am real, Kor. Believe in me—and come to me! I need you!*

"How? Where?"

Now one of the Drac warriors took to the air, swooping in wary circles over Kor, talons raking inches from his head. Kor wielded his knife to keep the bat-wings at a distance, waiting for Princess Sena to answer, heart leaping with the wonder of it. Sena lived! She needed him and wanted him!

Her answer was oblique, as if she herself could not help him, only suggest a means. *The Care Women's cave is halfway up the cliff.*

Kor blinked up at the great black wings threatening him from overhead. Suddenly he knew the answer. It was a miserly chance, to be sure. But it was the only one and he must try. He must get to Princess Sena or else die in the attempt. Her return made anything seem possible. The hammering of his heart made miracles credible.

He gave a couple of swipes across the air, when the flying Drac circled back, then seemed to stumble back on one folded knee. He waited. The Drac, triumphant, swooped down for the kill. Kor jumped.

The Drac hunter, like the other planetary rovers-for-food, was big, half again larger than average. He had to be to take a Helden and, by twos, haul him by air back to the Valley of Horror. Kor leaped out from under the double shadow of enormous wings, then dove while the Drac scrambled in what he was sure was a strike. Kor landed, belly-flop, on the furry foul-smelling back of the blood-eater, hiked forward in a swim motion until he could crook his elbow around the Drac's black neck. The hunter snarled and twisted to drive his fangs into Kor's well-sheathed arm; but Kor's hold was like iron and now his knife rammed just through the mottled hide where the jugular throbbed.

"Up!" he demanded. "Up!"

While the idioms of Helden and Drac were eons apart. Kor's cracking the beast's head upward did a lot to explain it.

"Up!"

Even so, the Drac's main plan right now was to shrug off his would-be rider, with aerial maneuvers and much muscular jerking. They lifted. The Drac bolted them upward between the rock walls in a whistling stream of



wind. He looped. He circled. He twisted. His enormous wings and his claws tried every trick in his book. But the claws couldn't quite reach back there and, giddy as his dawn's ride made him, Kor clung with not only his crooked arm around the Drac's throat but with knees and toes and a grim determination that defied all rules of gravity and sense. In the midst of their belly-churning gyrations, he caught wild glimpses of the village dropping under them. He retched from dizziness and loss of balance, grinning wanly at the diversion his break for freedom had wrought down there. Impatient, hungry, the populace of the plateau colony broke lines, determined not to be short-changed or kept waiting any longer. Little Dracs and big Dracs were pelting across the compound toward the rows of crosses; efforts to maintain order kept most of the herdkeeps and warriors busy, yet there were a dozen or more of the hunter-Dracs lifting already in pursuit of the eloping goody.

"Princess!" Kor cried. "Where can I go?"

*The cave's mouth is directly across from you on the left wall.*

"Across the gorge?" Kor shivered.

*Yes. Be very careful.*

Meaning no disrespect, Kor smiled wryly through the blur of driving fog-ragged wind. How he was going to be careful was something to ponder on, had he the time to do so. The cut below seemed to hack the planet to its molten center, for he could see miniature hell-pots bubbling down there between the jagged walls. For all his insane courage, Kor was at the mercy of the blood-beast under him, and must ride wherever the creature's wrath sped him.

*Look, Kor! See the wide lip in front of the cave? That is where you must go.*

Kor refrained from asking the Princess how he was going to manage such a landing. When his knee nudged the creature under him, as he might have done a white-maned steed purloined from the Tribes of the East Wind, his hint was ignored. The Drac moved away from the ledge, still heaving great muscle-shrugs in an effort to dislodge his rider.

Like the caves of the Helden Care Women, the cliff-cave of the Drac's baby-bringers was sacred, too. And no wonder none of the Helden captives had succeeded in escaping from any of the Drac plateaus! The cave was the only possible means of egress and it, too, was reached only by air!

Kor's mind flagellated itself desperately. He thought of one way but it was too perilous. Still, there wasn't any other way. He removed his knife from the Drac's neck, wheeled about, plunging it into the thick membrous black wing. The left wing.

The wing drooped. The Drac screamed.

*This is it, Kor! Once more—further out. . .*

His second outreaching thrust brought a throaty chitter of agony; this time the hunter was ready for him; the hideous head swung and Kor felt its fangs dig deep into the muscle of the arm that held him on the beast. He nearly let go from knifing pain. But at least the Drac was losing altitude and his torn wing was veering him toward the cave's lip. Kor put his knife back in the beast's neck fast and was afraid to take it away again. His flesh was ripped open from the bite, a severed artery sent blood globules flying into the fog.

He clung.

The outjut slanted nearer, nearer. Now it was less than ten yards almost directly below. But too far to attempt a wild jump yet.

Kor's heart leaped. He had never actually hoped to get this far and what lay beyond the indentation in the cliff wall didn't matter. That intrusion within the sacred precincts of the Care Women's domain meant instant death was no longer important to him. If the Watch-Gods erased him in a bolt of star lightning that was all right too. At least that would be clean.

*Kor! He is panicking! He'll kill himself rather than touch the forbidden place! Don't let—*

The voice within his mind was hurled to oblivion by the Drac's shrill cries, maniacal from his nearness to what had been seared into his brain since birth as taboo. Along with his shrieks came a thrusting super-drive of frenzied power. He must get away from here at once! Their pursuers had caught up but they hung on the air, chattering admonitions, at a distance of fifty yards or more. Kor knew what they were shouting to his beast. "Go no closer! Die, but do not profane the Holy Place! If you do, Condracu and all of the Watch-Gods will see it and will surely take horrible vengeance on all of us! The very least that will happen is that there will be no more Drac babies and the colonies will die out! This cannot happen! *Die!*"

Terror pulsed new life into the torn member; the hunter Kor rode put forth his last heart-bursting effort to pull himself away from the cliff. Kor caught a look into the gorge where minute pools of oxides seethed like chromatic eyes; hell's pot of toluidine blue and hellebore and serpentine green. And, rather than touch the sacred ledge, the blood-beast was fighting to plunge them both down into that!

Kor let out a whimpering yell. It was too high a drop still and the beast's wild panic took him now over, now above, the lip of rock. He had to do something and without a second's waste.

He swung the knife out and around, cutting, slashing, gouging the vulcanite outreach of wings to both sides. The Drac's fangs tore agonizingly at his crooked arm, freed from the knife. They were spinning and dropping, now, where he couldn't tell. And Kor could no longer cling with that bloodless arm. His elbow lost its vise-grip when the fangs cut a nerve-ganglion; his fingers slipped away; he fell. There was no time to wonder a last wonder about Princess Sena and if he would ever hear her voice in his mind again: only the sight of the Drac hunter's grotesque body tumbling and bumping rock as it fell into the colorful hell's pots.

## VII

**Night stars** were winking remotely down on the Gold suburb of palatial high rise mansion-apartments and the stars competed poorly with the shimmering skyline of the megalopolis in the distance. Yet, letting herself out of a small service entrance to the gardened rooftop, Sena took a minute to stare—not at the city where she was headed, but at the small winking stars. She stared and shivered. Then, with a little giggle at having evaded her overprotective parent, she hurried out through a service gate and waved down an aircab that was hovering around the land-platform with its free-light activated.

The ginger-faced Brown in the bubble gave her an appreciative grin, an impudent thing for a Brown to do when vis-à-vis with a Gold girl. Sena frowned and pulled a tenuous scarf up to hide her triangle of pretty face. Her attitude as she let him help her in the cab was that he was beneath her notice, as handsome and young as he was. The crinkle of his eyes told

Sena that the Brown guessed where she was going and, having seen her come out of the service gate, that she was being a bit wicked tonight. This Gold cutie with the wide dumb stare was going to a Lech party. They were the "in" thing this season. And her reason for being furtive was that she was the daughter of multimillionaire Gold Ambon, and a trifle young for the jaded set. Give her another six months and she would fling her flings with the wildest. All the Gold girls did. What else was there for them? They were too rich to sit home titilling to fake-action on Vicaria. . . .

He gave her a second all-inclusive stare, then upped the helio vehicle swiftly, darting it into his proper air-space and then aiming it at all the bright lights.

"Where to, Gold Lady?" His tone was almost flippant.

Under her golden sheen, Sena blushed. She saw the smile tugging the corner of the Brown's lips when she gave him the address. He fought a knowing grin. Most Browns would not have dared. There must have been a slipup at the Prism bottle plant when he was decanted. Somebody had goofed with his deprivational feeding, no doubt. He had ideas above his color; and cabbing Golds around at this hour of the night didn't make for the proper respect, either.

When the cab dropped easily on the roof platform identified by numbers in gold (indicating that this complex was severely restricted) with a gentle reverse-hiss to cushion the landing, Sena gave him his credit memo with a pettish toss.

"Your tattoo's covered."

"Ah! So it is, Gold Lady!" The cabbie grinned and flipped back his Brown coolcloak from the offending shoulder ident. "Kind of nippy after such a hot August day. My number is T-8z4p2bbb; that's in case you want to report me."

"I just might," she snapped back.

She flounced off in the direction of the main downramp. The Brown lit a cigarette and watched her dimpled hips swing off until they vanished behind the sign that said *Members Only*. Then he yawned and pulled out his notebook and ballpoint.

\* \* \*

The party was picking up speed when Sena had touched up the pale green lip makeup she affected for the Lechs and which went so well with her creamy-gold skin. The fresh bloom of her teenish youth needed very little ornamentation and her slim figure was scantily hidden in iridescent Turkish harem pantaloons of a cool lime shade that matched her lip and eye accent. Her simulated gold-coin fringed bra cupped breasts that rose and fell in girlish excitement when she stepped into the main bar for a preliminary casing of tonight's action. Sena was still young, unlike many around the lounges and the tasseled stools, and her blood sang bright songs. She ordered a mild lemon drink at the bar and let her eyes coolly meander across the dark perfumed room.

The double-occupant lounges were nearly all in use and the usual avant-garde crowd was clustered around the tables in hot and heavy discussion about art. That disgusting tramp, Zinni, was already all but nude and dancing on the transparent catwalk above the lounges, doing a suggestive imitation of the sex figures painted in light on the black velvet walls. Sena tossed her frown away from the woman and, studiously casual

about it, she moved down the barline as if hunting for somebody.

"Hey now!"

"I saw her first! I get to be *numero uno*, and I do mean—"

When the two male Golds moved in on either side of her, Sena gave them a wicked laugh apiece. "Later. Don't be in such a hurry." She brushed past them and moved back out into the main foyer and down a side hallway. Her face wore a moody pout as she flicked along the doors, trying a few and glancing in. What she saw bored her, it seemed. She moved on.

Finally she opened one door that surprised a delighted coo out of her. She went in.

It was an oversize child's playhouse. The four occupants in it wore kiddy clothes and they were playing "doctor." The man who was "doctor" lifted from jabbing a nipples bottle of martini into his female patient's mouth. He saw Sena, smiled.

"We've been hoping you'd show up."

"I was delayed. Father, you know." She grimaced.

"Sure, we know. Wanna play house?"

"Why not?"

The girls tittered, the second male made a grab at her, but playfully so as not to make his current conquest frown.

"You wanna play with us kids, you gotta dress up first." The "doctor" grinned down at his buster brown collar and knobby bare knees.

"Where—?"

"Back there. In the closet. You know, baby-puss!"

Sena ran over and pecked a kiss at his cheek. She clapped her hands and giggled; then she ran back through some bead curtains into the dressing room. It was small and the closet in back was untidily heaped with kiddie clothes of many eras. Sena swung the hangers back, searching and wrinkling up her nose. In the other room the merriment was hitting a crescendo.

She glanced back sharply.

The four in the other room were out of range and half-looped, except for the "doctor." Sena hesitated a double-second, then swept the clothes hanging in the closet to one side, easing her slim form behind them. She whisked the clothes back where they had been. Then she tapped the back wall of the closet. Three times. Twice. Once.

There was an answer-tap from behind the seemingly solid wall, then the wall slid back.

Sena stepped through. . . .

The man who drew her into the room behind the wall was a tall Gold with a long saturnine face and grave penetrating eyes. The other two were Blues, light-faced, high-spectrum. The woman was short, chunky, mid-fortyish, with crisp fading hair; the younger man standing with her was thinner than the Gold and shorter. From choice nutrient before birth in the decanting bottles, and forever after, Golds were by nature statuesque and clear-eyed; the small Blue with the scopic glasses and the cold smileless expression looked as if his early nutrient had been an exclusive diet of sea-mineral, from the cranial bulge and the X-ray manner in which he stared at her. It seemed as if it would take him a while to get over hating Sena for being a Gold.

The room was square and empty, except for a small table with folding chairs around it, and a plain tri-fold screen hiding a dressing table arrangement. There were no windows. The wall-lights were stark and

obvious.

"Sit down," the tall Gold told Sena. His voice was swift, his manner brusque.

Sena sat and waited for introductions.

"You're late," the tall Gold said flatly.

"Sorry, Jacob." Sena told them about the Brown cabbie with the insolent ways. "I think Father must have hired him to follow me around, to protect me."

"I don't like it," Jacob said.

"Nor I," the Blue with the glasses cracked. "If he is at all efficient he's sure to run onto something sooner or later." His cold blue eyes fixed on the girl. "Besides, it might not have been your father who hired him."

"Who then?"

"We've been hearing about your pattycakes with Gold Dorff."

Sena blushed. "Why would Gold Dorff—"

"Our Psych-head has the habit of picking his tidbits in virgin condition. He might want to keep a check on you to see that you stay that way." Sena breathed in hard at his bluntness and the raw implications.

Jacob took hold of her hand when the girl bristled up and half rose to go.

"Shut up a minute, Blue Jason." He tossed Sena a reassuring if brief smile. "Sena, I want you to meet Lorry."

"Blue Lorry." The chunky woman nodded and smiled thinly. "Blue courtesy of Prism. Lorry for Laurene, although I am built just a bit like an oldtime truck. Glad to meet you at last, Sena. I've heard very nice things. You've played your part to perfection. And don't let Blue Jason bug you. It takes him a while to get over his natural-born belligerence and unfortunately he will never win any acting awards. We keep him in labs and away from people as much as possible."

Sena touched the woman's hand impulsively, but her glance went to the angry young man. She understood and hoped Blue Jason Jones II would get over his dislike soon. She turned back to the stocky woman.

"You work for Gold Dorff, don't you?"

Lorry nodded. "I've managed to worm myself into a job of some responsibility, odious as the tasks may be and mostly are. It was necessary and to get where I have got I've done things that—no matter."

"Lorry is modest, Sena," Jacob said. "She's wrangled herself into what amounts to Gold Dorff's top assistant, which is unheard of for a Blue."

"I expect to sprout Gold wings any day now," Lorry put in with a laugh.

"Lorry's above suspicion, Sena. She works directly under Dorff himself; for that reason she is invaluable to our cause."

Sena's kitten-mask was long gone.

"And Blue Jason is the natural son of Blue Jason Jones, who invented deep-ident. Who perfected hypno-education and the all-titill neural bands that make livideo what it is today."

"Not that he wanted to do it," Blue Jason II told her. "But the rebellion movement didn't even start to stir until Gold Jacob Kley tossed his hat in the ring. You're only the fourth Gold we have recruited, Gold Lady—do you realize that?"

Sena glanced at Jacob uncertainly. The fierceness in Blue Jason's attitude scared her a little.

"I'm trying," she said mildly.

"And doing damn well!" Jacob put emphasis into his words. "Don't forget

that Sena has been with us for less than six months. She has accomplished as much as any one of us in the movement in that time, with nothing but the Gold frippery education to go on." His sharp look made Blue Jason II unbristle. "As for Blue Jason, we have him to thank for the deep-indent techniques that reversed his father's laser-waves; his work made Sena's part in the plan possible."

Sena saw some of the bitterness drop away as Blue Jason grasped her hand, firmly. Her quirk of a smile, almost shy, won him the rest of the way.

"Hello, Jason."

"Hello, Princess."

Jacob coughed briskly. "Yes. Jason is responsible for your contact with Kor. How is the head? You're careful to keep the minute incision scar hid even from your father?"

Sena nodded. "Of course. I have migraines, but I think that's from trying too hard. I'm getting through to Kor better all the time, I *think*."

"Night, as we planned. When the cameras aren't on him and when his mind is uncluttered by his constant struggle just to stay alive."

"Jacob, I understand that the gadget implanted in my head makes the deep-indent reverse itself, but why must I be such a—a phony?"

"Don't you see, Sena?" Lorry put in. "The Seven Kingdoms of Vicaria are saturated with legendry and myth, as they are with battle and sex. Our tight little computer civilization yearns subconsciously back to a more savage era when life was warm and sweet and swift and the devil took the hindmost, in truth. Gold Dorff's predecessors made it that way and that's how he keeps it. Our Prism people titill away their boredom by the hour identifying."

"And the Vicarites? How about them?" Her eyes stormed, thinking of Kor battling his life away to push back ennui for the multitudes fanned out from the Prism's spectrum of ident color-coding. More and more, she hated it and resented it. She loathed the idea that *others* followed Kor on his heroic adventures, that they shared his every emotion, that they titilled watching, listening, scenting, feeling his whole waking life.

Jacob explained.

"It's this way, Sena. The intelligent creatures of the Seven Kingdoms must have an inborn reason for being gallant or vicious or whatever they are designed to be. So a diversity of myths, loosely based on old Earth mythology and religion, was invented. It keeps them doing what they're supposed to do. Even though their minds are partially corked off at birth or soon after—to prevent them asking too many questions of each other and themselves beginning 'Why?'—they must have an innate feeling that there is some point to existence. In a way, it's like our own savage ancestors, inventing themselves gods to prove the whole business of their being here was not some random fluke. Hence, the various mythos, each suited to the Kingdom involved."

Sena stared at the white wall in silence, then blinked rapidly. "And with the Helden it is—"

"Princess Sena of the Cliff Tower."

"*But—Sena!*"

Jacob smiled. "Sena only to Kor. Others use other names, but your name fixed itself in Kor's mind some five months ago—when you first made contact. He thinks it was always Princess Sena, which of course isn't so. You did extraordinarily well! Better than we dreamed, first crack out of the box!"

"Maybe it's because—"

"I think I understand, Jacob, being a woman." Lorry's unpainted mouth quirked at the corners, but her voice was very soft. "Sena began to fall in love with Kor, early in the game. Her natural sympathy drew him, above and beyond Jason's machine in her head; drew him and bound her to him."

"That's bad!" Blue Jason scowled. "We don't need emotional entanglements to muck up the movement! That's something we don't need!"

"So speaks the cold brooding scientist mind," Jacob said mildly. "Yet, isn't that what our rebellion is all about? Aren't we really fighting for the privilege of feeling strong emotion? Suffering? Dying? Loving? Hating? Without being hooked up to a machine!"

"There's more to our fight than that," Lorry put in. "Of course we are fighting to be individual human beings and to have our private hungers and desires without their being taped or planned out for us. But there is the idea of stifled progress, too. Where are the stars? Here we sit and there they are! We could reach out to them. We could ride a comet's tail to the end of the universe—only His Goldness IX doesn't want us to. So here we sit, like bumps on a log, *titilling!* Not to even mention the incredibly vicious things that go on behind the walls of the Prism!" Her voice became ice cold with bitterness at all she had seen and unwillingly done.

Sena shivered. The whole idea of a rebellion—an actual underground movement to change the patterned order of things—had struck her with the force of a thunderbolt. She had never quite understood. She was bewildered, still. The meetings had been so brief and furtive and sketchy. She had to know; she was humiliatingly conscious of the fact that her education had been sadly neglected. The daughter of Gold Ambon didn't need to know much of anything to function in the society in which she moved; she had played it like that all of her eighteen years, was still playing it like that for the benefit of her father and their friends; yet, all the time, underneath the seeming vapidness of her nature was the great underlying bulk of potential, like the disproportionally huge underwater bulk of an iceberg.

Sena was avid to know everything there was to know about the movement. If she was to help Kor. . .

"Why did you pick me?" she blurted. "Do I look like the Princess?"

"You know you do." Lorry smiled. "You were studied and plotted for a year before Jacob made the contact. You didn't know it but your servants, your Blue and Green friends—even the so-called base-shades—were feeding us information about you. We monitored your private tel-vis, for which please forgive us. We dug deep beneath the silly veneer and were very impressed with what we found there."

"How could you do all that?"

"You forget who we are."

"Who?"

"Blues. Scientists and mechs of all lands, mainly. We are the ones who manage the machinery and keep it running smoothly. The Prism Code restricts us almost to the point of strangulation, but we do manage to throw a monkey wrench into the gears from time to time."

"You mean you already have tried to—"

"No," Jacob said swiftly. "Lorry didn't mean that. She just meant that sometimes we can make furtive little changes in the great Machine that keeps our civilization functioning. Such as monitoring your tel-vis. But

nothing at all big. Not yet. Any overt move right now could kill everything we've sweated so hard building up. And we have to be painfully careful who we let in. Believe it or not, most of the population want things as they are! They *want* to remain spineless sheep!"

"They've been conditioned to want that," Lorry said. "You can't blame them. The mere idea of being routed out of their comfortable spoon-fed crèches scared the pants off them!"

Sena nodded thoughtfully. "I know that I'm stupid—"

"Not stupid. Uninformed, purposely."

"Still, I'm ignorant. But I have got a mind and it's trying to swallow and digest all of this. One thing does puzzle me a lot."

"Yes, child?"

Sena's face burned at the *child*. "You sounded like my father just then. He keeps calling me 'child' and I'm not! Compared to most of my friends—"

"He's only trying hard to preserve your innocence as long as he can, Sena, and hurray for him," Lorry broke in. "I've always felt there were hidden depths in Gold Ambon, if only we could reach them. Do you think—?"

"No!" Blue Jason cried. "He's too old and too rich!"

"Most fathers nowadays let their daughters go to hell in a bucket as soon as they want to. Ethics and chastity haven't much meaning in our Prismic world. Gold Ambon has some ennobling old-fashioned ideas but—I agree with Jason. He is a good man even if he is rich, but he is too old. We need virility and youthful resilience. He might make a slip, and one slip could stifle the movement forever." His mind clicked back a notch or so. "You started to make an important point, Sena?"

The girl nodded. "I suppose this is typical Gold thinking, but—even if we are spineless sheep, as you said, isn't that better than the world of the primitives? Constant wars, disease, poverty, boredom! There were any number of unfairnesses and cruelties. At least our so-called base-colors are *conditioned* to enjoy or at least tolerate what they must do all their lives. Seems to me there is less cruelty and horror now than in the 'good old days.' Is that what we want? To go back to *that*?"

## VIII

**Jason's laugh** had a bite to it.

"I can see Uncle Dorff has been giving you the treatment again!"

Sena turned defensively to Jacob. She had to be totally convinced. When Gold Jacob had first propositioned her, with intriguing hints of a fun-new-thing the Lechs were doing, she had gone along just for something to do. Anything to relieve her adolescent boredom and need for self-expression. Then—Kor. She was well on the hook; she could not turn back now if she wanted to, but she had to *know*. The cerebrals Uncle Dorff had talked about had come to the fore.

Jacob gave Jason a remonstrative frown. "Not go back, Sena. Forward. A wide new world with—as Lorry hinted—immeasurable horizons out there in all time and space. The world we've got now doesn't like change. His Goldness IX has things the way he wants them and, except for minor modifications of the Prism machinery, it has been kept that way through ten generations—ever since His Goldness I.

"Our Prism world functions like a well-greased pocket watch. It's patterned. Neat. No wars. Everybody has enough to eat and Vicaria for



titills. It is efficient."

"It's not wasteful, like the bad old days!"

"Oh, but it is! Where it counts most! It's wasteful in *human* talent! Potential genius is stifled so that it won't make waves. We're all in pretty little slots and there we stay until we die and our bodies are sent to the magnesium-cobalt recovery furnaces. It is degrading! His Goldness V permitted space exploration as far as Vicaria, in Proxima by the way—and then—uh-uh. No more. Nothing. We are self-contained, bottled up on our little space-island forever, if His Goldnesses I-to-Infinity have their way! Human progress is stopped dead in its tracks!"

"Besides the outrages that are perpetrated in the Prism hospitals on a daily basis." Lorry's voice was harsh and cold.

"Tell me—!"

Lorry's eyebrows questioned Jacob, who consulted his wrist chronometer and nodded. "We had already planned to move again. This was to be our last meeting of this cell of the movement, and what Sena told us about the Brown cabbie makes the move imperative. Still, Sena is an important key, now. She should know all we have time to tell her. Make it quick!"

"Sure, Jacob. You know that all children are born out of the decant bottles in Prism hospitals, Sena?"

Sena nodded. "So that they can be pigmented and tattooed at birth. Saves the mothers credits, Unc—Gold Dorff said."

"And that the pigmenting is regulated by ancestry and intelligent quotient, I suppose!" Lorry furthered, bitterly. "I've worked mainly in obstetrics and pediatrics in my twenty Prism years and believe me, it just isn't so. Golds control all that goes on. Golds pick and choose. If an inbred thin-blooded Gold woman is shone to be carrying a potential moron or physical defective, a switch is made. She leaves the hospital with a brilliant, if unfulfillable, offspring that was actually conceived by Browns or even Blacks. It is mostly a matter of early feeding or deprivation. That's how Blacks and Browns are made. Alcohol in the bloodstream during the most vulnerable stages. If a base-color woman has an unauthorized child (since the population is rigidly Prism-controlled) both parents are made sterile and the child is shunted off to the farm-labs."

Sena felt a chilly ripple across her spine. "What about the farm-labs? Dorff wouldn't tell me. I asked."

"Naturally Dorff wouldn't tell you. Very few people are in the know. As to their being 'farms,' they are only in the sense that breeds are crossed and recrossed, and new strains are created by genetic design."

"W-What for?"

"Where do you think Kor and all the other Kingdoms' critters originated?"

Sena gasped.

*Kor. . .*

"Then they are truly human!"

"Of course they are human. It has been implied over the years that the men and women of Vicaria are only androids and mech-things of various kinds. Not so. Human flesh is a darn sight cheaper to produce and more malleable. Besides, in order for the deep-ident to be completely successful the contact has to be human to human. *Kor* doesn't seem android to you, does he?" Her shrewd eyes danced sparks that were close to being mischief.

"Then—the Helden are *bred* to be—"

"Big and strong and beautiful," Lorry said briskly. "And Circe's girls are bred for pneumatic beauty and sexiness."

"How do they get to Vicaria?"

"Teleporters concealed in the deepest part of the Care caves. Places that are strictly taboo. Nobody dares to go there. The religio-conditioning is very strong about it. There are seven of these transmitters, one for each of the Kingdoms. After the babies are brought there, the Care Women of each Kingdom take charge. These women are themselves conditioned to be substitute mothers to the babies and to instill in them very early the taboos and musts of the particular tribe in which the child is to function. After the Care Women, the child is put in the charge of a Teacher. The Teachers instruct each child in the duties which are to make up his life's work, whether it be hunt-fight-kill or sex-sex-sex."

"What about—" Sena stopped short, blushing.

"Liti?" Lorry guessed shrewdly. "Kor's girl friend? I thought that would come up. Girls like Liti are not a very important part of Helden life-pattern, actually. They cook and sew and do the homely tasks while their men are out hunting and fighting. But they aren't important, titill-wise. They only serve to give the heroes somebody to come home to and make them feel all the more heroic. Since they cannot function the way a one hundred percent woman does—"

"Have children, you mean."

Lorry nodded. "Only the low animal and monster types are permitted to give birth to their own young on Vicaria. You can easily see why. There might be evolutionary sports or throwbacks. All sorts of genetic confusion would result, since the actual percentage of the Vicarites is the result of a farm-controlled hodgepodge. Evolution might well lead to *revolution* when the natural offspring began to do some serious thinking. No. The pattern has to remain consistent, same as here on Earth, for the status quo to stay put."

Fleeting thoughts of Kor as the result of a cold-blooded laboratory product, genetically human though he was, stiffened Sena's whole body with quivering indignation.

"Of course the various and sundry monsters—the kelpies and the unicorns and dragons and whatnots—are literally hacked up and *made* in the Prism labs. Mostly they are based on Terran legendry. Still a lot of them have their bases in human genes. Our more depraved genetic engineers have a ball ad-libbing monsters."

"But you said the animals on Vicaria bred and gave birth?"

"The true animals, yes."

"But I've seen dragon's eggs!"

"Fire lizards and Imps of Darkness from Narborough Island and the Galapagos. True Terran life forms, evolved artificially for size, but these relatives of the dinosaurians once roamed Earth more abundantly than they do Vicaria. The warm tropical sun there brought them and some of the others back. The dragons are exceptions to the rule. The myth creatures made up in the Prism labs for piquancy of titill can't mate; they must be constantly replenished, with endless variations on legend-themes to give our livideo-addict civilization new and wilder titills."

Sena worked hard to absorb it all. Her young mind was awlirl, and in the geometric center of the maelstrom stood a muscular giant with brooding deep gray eyes, a grim resolute figure rising out of the swirling mists like some ancient forest god.

Her eyes moved from Lorry to Jason, then to Jacob.  
"Tell me what to do," she begged.

## IX

**They were waiting** for her in Gold Jacob's penthouse lab. Jacob affected the trappings of an ancient alchemist. It was his hobby. As a bachelor Gold of middle age, bored with sex and livideo, he had to find something to toy with—so his huge untidy apartments were cluttered with artifacts of medieval *magos* and sorcerers of many ilks. In the general clutter there was everything from artifacts, genuine and spurious, of freemasonry and Zoroastrianism to devices for raising the dead, ectoplactic cameras, psychometry and thaumaturgy.

The bewildering confusion into which Sena stepped was enough to bring superior smiles to the faces of his usual guests, and the gobbledegook he affected to go with it—all in deadpan seriousness—was just what Jacob wanted. Here was a man more than slightly off the beam. A base-color with his pretensions would be packed off to a nut-farm. His callers, among them Gold Dorff and other Prism biggees, took one beady-eyed look; one visit invariably allayed any wisp of suspicion and Jacob's long-winded harangues about having discovered Great Bleeding Truths were usually enough to send them out quoting Foe's laconic raven.

What lay carefully hidden in the mess would have surprised them. . . .

"You made it," Jacob said. He brushed a skull and some moldy snakeskins off an antique chair. "Sit down."

Sena couldn't. She was too choked up with excitement. Every nerve in her body twanged. The way they all looked. Staring at her. Jacob. Lorry. Jason.

"Something went wrong!" she cried.

Her heart stopped.

"Not exactly." Jacob's face was stone-serious. "Please sit down, Sena. And stop wringing your hands like that."

"Do," Lorry begged. "You're as pale as—"

"As a princess in a fairy tale?"

Sena forced herself to something resembling calm. If she should swoon it might be in keeping with her role but it would not be acting. *Kor!*

Her eyes clung to Jacob. "I-I couldn't tell. After they carried him into the cave—!"

"There aren't any livideo cameras in the cave, naturally. Except the monitors, and we managed to jam those for a few minutes, long enough to get Kor into the transmitter. It was touch and go. Our rebs in the teleportation department did a remarkable job of replacement. There were no less than sixteen non-rebs who had to be sidetracked, made ill, or respotted and all for believable reasons. It was a regular chess game."

"But he made it! Kor is *here!*" Sena half-rose. "Where—"

"Take it easy, Princess." Jason's grin was slow in coming but his manner was less begrudging than before. Sena had pulled off her part like a pro. They could hardly have done the trick without her. She had earned his trust.

"Yes. He's here," Jacob told her. "In the other room."

"Then what's wrong?"

"He took quite a beating. You saw. Lorry patched him up. He had to be put under drugs when we sewed up the rips in his arm. Those Drac fangs

are brutal."

"When—"

Jacob's lips quirked up. "Give him another hour at least, Princess."

"Stop calling me *Princess!*"

Lorry touched her shoulder. "You'll have to put up with it for a while, I'm afraid. To Kor you *are* Princess Sena. You are the reason he battled his way here."

Jacob nodded gravely. "We can't risk a traumatic shock at this point. As you know, we picked Kor because he is a random telepath; what's more important even than that, he's an oddball, a throwback with a quick mind that wants to know *why*. The kind that has been bred out of most Helden and everybody else, practically. Sometimes the lab boys miss. They missed on Kor. It will be an awful wallop, psychologically, finding out the truth. I only hope Kor can take it."

"That's where you come in, Princess," Lorry added. "A great deal depends on what happens when he first wakes up."

Jacob paced, tight-lipped.

"Think of it this way," he said. "How would you feel to wake up some morning and find out that your whole life up to that point had been a phony and a farce?"

"I did," Sena said softly.

\* \* \*

When it was time, Lorry drew Sena into an antechamber of cabalistic designs and spiritualist's velvet hangings. "Time for you to dress, Princess."

"Dress?" Sena blinked at the filmy blue tulle gown with the long cobweb-thin train. "More theatrics?"

"As Jacob said, a lot depends on what happens when he first comes out of it. Think. He battled up that cliff and an army of Dracs to come to you, as you told him to. He can't see you dressed in that skintight Gold's tunic. He must see what his whole emotional life has been preparing him to see. Princess Sena. Alive."

Sena slipped reluctantly into the blue taffetas veiled in misty white tulle, sighing. "I feel like the kind of nitwit I've been pretending to be all this time."

"Don't," Lorry urged. "This is deadly serious. We need Kor desperately, but he's no good to us with his brains addled by shock. Sit still while I put on your makeup. Story book princesses didn't have gold skins. Um. Midas' daughter, maybe." She applied a base of snow-white with rose petal pink above the cheekbones. "I've been practicing, but I'm not much good at this sort of thing. Knowing what a beauty I'm not and never was, I never bothered to learn."

Sena stared at herself in the hand mirror in disbelief.

Was this really her? Was this how Earth people once really looked?

"Isn't it a little—too?" she asked.

"Maybe so. You finish the job."

Sena did her best, critically, with fast-beating heart; when she stood up to arrange her train Lorry added the touch that made her a true legendary princess—a miniature crown of silver encrusted with shimmering diamonds. Lorry pulled her out for inspection and the men's open stares put her teeth on edge.

"Well? Am I all right?"

Jacob's long face cracked a mock-humble smile as he bent and kissed her fingers. "Princess Sena—may I have the honor?"

Jason opened the door to Jacob's bedroom, which, in contrast to the clutter rampant in the rest of his menage, was of monastic simplicity. The room was half-dark; all there was in it was the bed and a small night-table by it; the other functional, clothes drawers and closets, were hidden in the beige walls.

Seeing the dim bulk that all but filled the simple couch-bed Sena's heart jumped into her throat. How often she had seen him, empathized, strode the forest paths with him, suffered his hurts to a degree, read his every thought—all with a raw equanimity that hurt her worse every time, knowing what it all meant. Still, it was her task and she did it. But *this*: this was reality. . . .

Jacob bent down gravely to adjust her train.

"Ready?"

"Not alone!"

"Alone."

He stepped back. The door shut softly behind her as Sena moved unsteadily toward the figure on the bed. From his cluttered den Jacob must have adjusted the light in the walls; by the time she reached Kor it had increased enough so that she could see the man whom she had lived with so many months, by Blue Jason Jones' deep-indent livideo and Blue Jason Jones II's reversal technique. She could reach down and actually touch him if she wanted to.

Kor was still wearing the brief leather tunic of the Forest Helden; it was clotted and stained with blood, his own and others'. His empty sword-sheath with its shoulder strap were lying near him on the table. His face was cragged and widely handsome, burned near-sepia by the blazing Vicarian sun. Sena winced at the lacerations and pale scars that marred the muscular brown arms and legs. Kor's life had been one battle after another: his body was the Scoreboard.

He had been washed and shaved, and Sena had the heart-stopping sensation that she looked down at a lifeless body. Kor's wounds had been worse than they knew. Even the redoubtable modern medical magic had failed. They said what killed the strongest heart was—sudden shock. Kor had seen something he ought not to have seen! Kor was dead!

Sena cried out his name. Her hand flew to his cheek. It was warm and she saw now that his wide chest was moving rhythmically in an exhausted sleep. The opiates had worn off, but his abused body demanded more rest.

She sat near him on the bed, waiting.

She wondered. Had she done the right thing? For *Kor*? He had been designed for the rigorous outdoor life of the Helden. Even the fight for survival was integral in his makeup. Kor was a man—a virile, primitive, geared-for-action man—and a man of his breed no longer fit into the stilted world of the Prism. There was no place for him here. The rebellion needed him, yes. He was part of their plan.

*But what about Kor?*

To him, what he had left would be reality—waking the illusion!

Her pang of doubt made her moan. Impulsively she bent across the giant chest and kissed his rough full lips.

Kor stirred at her touch. His gray-green eyes snapped open.

"It is you, Princess!"

Sena swallowed back a dry sob. "Yes, Kor. It is me. I called to you

across the stars and you came to me.”

His body leaped up like a great tawny cat's; his hands took hold of her arms, hard. “You're real. You're not dead!”

“No.”

“When you told me about the girl in the tower being only wax, I couldn't quite believe.”

“Believe, Kor. Believe in *me!*”

He swarmed on her with questions. His arms moved to crush her close to him, but he restrained himself, putting all of his feelings into a tempestuous rush of words. Where was he? What was this strange place? How had he escaped the wrath of the Watch-Gods? Why had she seemed to forsake him at times? Above all, what was the heroic task which he was privileged to perform for her? Was she in danger? Were they both? Fetch him a sword and he would battle great armies of giants for her!

“Tell me, Princess,” he demanded. “Tell me everything.”

Sena moved her cheek to his for a long moment.

“Listen to me, Kor.”

“I am listening, my Princess!”

“What I have to tell you is strange—”

“Strange? How?”

“So strange that it will be hard for you to believe that it is true. And harder still for you to accept.”

“Tell me,” he urged. “For you I'll believe anything.”

“I will try. But keep this thought in your mind before everything else, always. You will hear incredible things and see things impossible for you to understand. But remember this well and forever. Your Princess loves you, Kor. With every breath I take I love you and need you. Whatever the others say, however it pains you—”

Kor laughed and kissed her, hard.

“*You* tell me. Then I will go out and fight dragons and Dracs or any other manner of monster that threatens you here in this strange kingdom.”

## X

**In the end**, Sena's halting words had no meaning for Kor. The sight of her, the warmth of her, meant much more than the senseless things she was spouting. Kor's hunger was a star-wide emptiness, a cosmic vacuum, yet the nearness of his Princess filled every part of it. As for the wild things she was telling him, they were but maniacal babblings. What else? Nobody could possibly. . .

Two others, men in strange metallic garb, came in and took her gently away. Right in the middle of his own barrage of counter-questions and his stampede of heroic love. They told him he must eat, then sleep. They put him in a strange iron chair and fastened rope-like things to his wrists and put a shiny cap like a helmet on his head. He would sleep, they said. And when he woke up he would know the truth.

He slept.

In drowsy half-sleep he thought he heard voices, saying the same kind of idiot things Princess Sena had tried to tell him.

“How long has he been under?”

“Nearly six hours.”

“That's a big jolt to give him in one session!”

"Don't I know it! But we haven't time—"

"Jacob," Princess Sena's soft voice pleaded, "does it have to be like this? Can't I try just once more?"

"Sorry, it'll have to be the hypno-learner. It's faster. There just isn't time to give it to him in small doses—normally! You tried. Actually, what you told him did seep in at the unconscious level. It will help a lot."

"How?"

"It will shade what the learner thrusts electronically into his memory cells. The pictures the tapes print on his brain will give him a sort of artificial memory of Earth in the age of the Prism, as if he had lived here in some earlier life. What you told him was incomprehensible; I knew it would be. But it greased the gears, so to speak, and will give the emotional areas a cushion to fall back on. You told him you loved him. Good."

"You were listening!" Sena accused hotly.

"Sure. It was necessary. We're not playing Lech kiddy games, you know. We had to assess Kor's first reactions and take it from there." The voice was crisp, flat.

He awoke ravenous with hunger. What they gave him to eat looked piddling compared with blood-rare *selki* steaks of the forests and the gourd-bowls of tropical fruits and legumes the Helden preferred raw and washed down with a kind of mead. But he devoured the pasty stuff and drank the yellowish drink, all of it, from the decanter itself; surprisingly the gruel satisfied him and made him sleepy again.

"How do you feel?" the man called Jacob asked, smiling.

"Tired."

"Good. Sleep."

There were three more sessions with the wired helmet and the steel chair. Kor's half-consciousness took little notice of his surroundings or of the strange faces. Even Princess Sena, hovering anxiously in the background, was part of his leaden-weighted dreams.

Deep in his sleep came the knowing.

Then it was over and he woke, a different man. . . .

He looked down at himself. They had changed his clothes somewhere along the line. He now wore a close-fitting metallic tunic; it was a comfort to look down and see a familiar long white scar on his left arm from one of his many brushes with death; the ugly holes where the Drac fangs had torn into him were more than half healed, by some miracle. But at least these things were part of himself, the Kor he knew. It was Kor's body, yes. But the *mind* was not Kor's. It was cluttered up with thoughts Kor of the Forest Helden knew nothing about, memories of a world Kor could not possibly have known.

His mind was expanded. His hands made fists and fought the air, as if he hoped to drive off the unwanted new knowledge. It hurt. He resented what had been imprinted onto him while he had been half-drugged and helpless; some intricate matrix had superimposed booksful of memories on his mind and his primitive nature hated it.

He snapped his look away from himself for relief. He glared at Jacob, who was snapping off the switches on the hypno-learner.

"My head hurts like hell!" he growled.

"Sorry. Really sorry, Kor." The tall figure moved up, registering sympathy. "We had to rush the job. We're short on time. We need you and your Helden bad—and soon. How do you feel otherwise?" He moved his look over Kor's healing wounds critically.

Kor flexed his giant muscles and stood up. The room rocked and spun; he sat down again fast.

"Take it easy. Just sit there. Give yourself time."

"Time? You said—"

Jacob grinned. "Yeah, I know. I meant, take five. Take ten, even. Then you can go outside and smash down the Prism." Jacob handed him some more of the golden-colored liquid. "Drink this. It'll give you energy and snap up your conscious mind."

"I'm always drinking or eating something," Kor complained. He was still thrusting back the new strange thoughts, denying them.

"Go ahead. It'll help." Jacob turned. "I'll go fetch Sena. She has been waiting an hour for you to wake up, in the other room. She wanted to stay with you all through the mind-matrix bit, but we couldn't let her. It was too dangerous. The others, too."

While he drank the elixir and waited alone, Kor kept himself from smashing the glass and the decanter and everything else in the wacky room by a supreme effort of will. His attitude toward Jacob and this new world in which he found himself came out as irritability, but it was more than that. Geared for the physical, he wanted to smash things. People, preferably. His fingers balled into fists.

But the elixir had a tranquilizing effect, too; it was as if a soothing balm spread itself across his wild emotions.

Sena came in.

Kor stared at her. She looked different. Her dark hair was coiffed up on top of her head and slightly back, not down around her shoulders like Princess Sena of the castle legend. Her complexion was tan-gold, not milk-white and roses. But her lake-blue eyes were just the same. Just the same. And they said things that helped more than the elixir. . . .

Two others came in behind her. A short stout woman and a thin nervous man wearing thick glasses. He remembered them vaguely from before and during the learner sessions. When Jacob introduced them as Lorry and Jason he nodded. Jacob called them "Blues." And they were. They were colored *blue*.

Kor's new knowledge told him why. He gave them both sullen distrusting looks. Sena, too, as she moved shadowlike to a seat as far from him as she could get. Mingled with the empathic hurt was guilt. She had done this to him and she was sorry about it.

"Okay," Jacob began crisply. "We're all here. Let's take a runoff on what you know about yourself in relation to the Prism world, Kor. See how much you can consciously pull up. You need what the Madavs call saturation."

Kor put his mind in a track that sidestepped too much Prism at first. "I am a Forest Helden from Vicaria," he said grimly. "When I was a baby I was put in a matter-transmitting machine with a batch of other children like myself. We were drugged first. We woke up crying in the Sacred Cave. The Sacred Cave is forbidden to everyone except the Care Women."

"There are seven caves," Jacob put in. "One for each of the Seven Kingdoms. The seven groups Of Care Women are of course genetically designed for whichever Kingdom they mother in. They're tinged over with taboos and religious awe to keep children away as they get older. Go ahead, Kor."

"When the Care Women gave me to my Teacher I was trained how to fight and hunt—and how to die with courage. I learned well. My comrade, Atlan, learned well, too. Those who did not die soon. There are dangers



everywhere on Vicaria. Every day is a battle for survival. I am leader of my Forest Tribe." He smashed a fist into his palm so that the physical hurt would divert some of the pain raking across his mind and his emotions. "I—I didn't know that all of this was a prepared *game!* I didn't know that everything I did was scanned by hundreds of livideo cameras built into Vicaria. When I fought, when I ate, when I sang around the night fires with my comrades, when I kissed Liti—everything I did was watched and—*shared!* I was part of an entertainment for a world full of—"

"Go ahead, Kor." Jacob's hand touched his shoulder. "Let it come out. Say anything you want to. We here in this room are in no way responsible. On the contrary, we're risking our necks trying to change the situation, but—take it out on us if you want to, Kor. Say anything you like."

But the words choked in his throat. Words were not enough. His fists slammed down on the arms of his chair savagely; he snapped shut his eyes as if that would blot out the new knowledge. But it didn't help.

After a while he felt a soft hand on his arm.

"Kor."

Sena's eyes were wet with tears. She met his hate, his look of all-encompassing distrust, evenly.

"Yes—Princess?" His voice dripped irony.

"Listen to me, Kor. That you and all of your comrades in the Helden were and are brave, honorable heroes—that is something nobody can ever take away. It happened. You were and you are! Whether your deeds were shared while you performed them, or read about and sung about later on—it comes to much the same thing. Doesn't it? At the Tribal Gatherings of the Forests your bards sing the praises of the dead heroes in great sagas and—hearing them—in a manner you relive them! Is it so very different if somebody is going along with you on one of your heroic quests—*while* you are doing it?"

Kor looked at her, shrugged. "It's the reason they're doing it. For titill!"

Her cheek brushed his. "Think of it this way, Kor. You were and you are a hero. They are not. It is *they* who deserve scornful sympathy, not you. Feel pity for them! They're weak and puny and stupid. They're worse off because you were trained to be heroic and you are. They're conditioned to be spineless lugs who have to ride along on your heroism. Pity them, Kor! Help us to change everything!"

Kor scowled up at her. He took hold of her hand. "Sena, you did talk to me at night? You did ask me to come to you and help you?" The agony was beginning to relent. She had made a point and a good one. It was like pitying a weaker comrade who tried but didn't quite have it in him. There were some such. They hadn't the heart for battle; they died young.

"Kor, all your life you had an intuitive feeling that you were special. Different from your comrades. Destined for something wonderful. Well, you were and are! We here in this room—Jacob—Lorry—Jason—and I—we are only four members of a secret rebellion against His Goldness IX and the Prism and all it stands for! There are other cells, all over the world! But—we need you and Helden to succeed! The Prism code-banks have us strangled without you! Don't you see, Kor—whatever kind of a hero you were before is nothing to what you must be now!"

Kor's lips curved in a quizzical grin.

"But *you*, Sena! You called me. Why—me?"

"I'll answer that," Jacob put in. "You were picked even before Sena joined the rebs. You were picked because you were the strongest and

bravest—and lucky for us, brainiest, if unfulfilled cerebrally. You've got a good deal of esp, even more than Sena has. Hers had to be amplified by Jason's brain-giz. A miniature transmitting device related to livideo and aimed directly at you, Kor. It was hit and miss but thanks to Jason's genius—and the two of you—we hit!”

“I see. It was all planned. Sena was to egg me into climbing up to the castle. The Dracs. The whole thing was planned, almost,” he ended dryly, “almost like livideo itself.”

“We had to use every scrap of ingenuity we could dream up and all the devices at hand.”

“Sure, sure.” Kor's eyes touched Sena's stormily.

“Consider the work that went into all this, Kor. It didn't just happen. Gold! Luckily the Psychs can't interfere with what goes on in the minds of the Vicarites, only spot troublemakers by their actions. The way they function after their priming and conditioning by the Care Women and the Teachers is random but it follows a pattern. You were the oddball, Kor. Your mind tuned itself to Sena's and some quirk of prenatal conditioning had slipped by the Prism genetic engineers. Of course Sena had to be the Princess and your first references to her had to be laughed at by Atlan and the others. We were lucky with the Dracs, but mostly you pulled off that end of it like the true hero you are. It was a delicate combination of string-pulling and physical acumen. As Sena said, you were a hero and no mistake about it!”

A flaw occurred. “What about the livideo cameras? Weren't they on me when I rode the Drac to the cave? Didn't they see?”

“Only the first part. The cave is purposely out of range and we managed to do some scrambling. As far as any titilling goes, you fell into the gorge along with the Drac.”

“Are you sure?” Sena asked anxiously.

Lorry answered her. “It was my job to watch for ripples at the Prism. There weren't any. So far as the monitors are concerned, Kor is dead. The bubbling hell-pots got him.”

Kor got up and tried his legs. They worked fine. Little by little he was beginning to adapt himself to the new Kor. After all, better to learn the truth now and work with the Prism rebels toward change than to have gone to his death a livideo puppet. Even the brand on his pride was cooling off.

“Where am I? I mean—what is this place?”

“Jacob's home,” Sena told him. “Don't mind all the claptrap. It's all camouflage for the real work that goes on. Being a Gold, Jacob has special privileges and—”

“Being something of a nut”—Jacob grinned—“nobody pays me much attention. I put on a big Cagliostro show once a month to keep the other cuckoos happy.”

Kor prowled the room, flexing his muscles and his brains, too, to assimilate the prodigious gulp he'd had thrust on him.

“Is there a chance?”

“We hope so. Most of the Blues are with us and they are the ones who keep the machines running. The Browns and Blacks would be, if they really understood. They've been conditioned since before birth to *want* life the way they've got it; they'll have to be completely retrained. That'll come later. The Greens and Reds will help, once we get a foot in the Prism. They're intelligent enough to recognize what we're trying to do. Right now it is mostly the Mechs—plus a few Golds we feel can be trusted.”

Kor nodded thoughtfully. The scientist-mechs were sick of being smothered and catalogued in the great Prism code-bank, with no chance of true self-expression at all. And some of the Golds were bored into the idea of change.

"How about us?"

"The Kingdoms of Vicaria?"

"Yes."

"As for the other six, we'd like to use 'em, but there isn't time to work on it. It'll have to be the Helden only."

Kor sucked in air. "You want to bring them all here to fight His Goldness IX and the Prism?"

Jacob smiled thinly. "Like to. Have a regular knock-down drag-out anarchy. Clean up the whole mess in one swell foop."

Sena gasped. "You don't really mean that. Most of the populace, whatever their color-code, are decent. They've just been conditioned and stifled all their lives. You wouldn't want to kill them all, even the Golds. Father—"

"Don't worry. Your father is safe and so are all the others who don't actually resist, when the time comes." He paced a few steps, scowling, sighing. "Anyway, that isn't practical. We couldn't get the whole shebang through the teleporters fast enough or secretly. No. We want only a select group. That's where Kor comes in. He'll have to go back—"

"I can't go back!" Kor cried. "I'm dead!"

"Don't worry. We've got it worked out."

"But what good will a handful of Helden, however hand-picked, do against the Prism?"

"Don't you see, Kor? It's the fact that you aren't coded in the Prism banks that makes the difference. It gives you the freedom of action and movement nobody here on Earth enjoys. We will tell you what to do and you will do it. Okay?"

Kor grinned and moved across the room to Sena, who had retreated to her corner. While the others discussed immediate plans, to get them back to their posts as quickly as possible, Kor pulled Sena close to him.

"One thing first."

"Yes, darling?"

"What you said when I first woke up here in your wacky nutfarm of a world. Did you mean it—?"

"That I love you and always will?"

He nodded.

Her lips answered him, by moving up on his. Across the room, Jacob called out twice before Kor let her go.

"Kor!" His third was brittle.

Kor turned, with considerable reluctance, his arm holding on to Sena tightly. It didn't matter whether she was Princess Sena or what now. The response was right.

"Yes, sir, Gold Jacob!"

"We've been talking it over, Lorry and Jason and I. As I said, the Helden aren't coded with the Prism banks, which gives them a terrific edge over any of us. But we'll have to give you a coat of paint for a disguise. We had better do it right away and contrive a plausible cover-ident to go with it. Which would you prefer to be? Blue? Green? Gold?"

Kor gave a tight little grin. "Go ahead. Color me any damn thing you want to. After learning what kind of a world my Princess has brought me

to—color me sick.”

## XI

**Meanwhile**, in another part of the Forests. . .

Liti and Atlan consoled each other as best they could for their mutual loss; the tribe of the Purple Forests elected Atlan their new chief. Kor's death was a sad blow for everyone. That it must come one day was a concomitant of Helden life, yet even the novice warriors had sensed an awesome difference in the giant-muscled creature with the tawny mane of hair and the dreaming eyes. Had Kor met his death at the hands of one of the hostile tribes during a woman-taking expedition, had it been a sea Kelpie or a Deef from the spider city or a Centaur from the Red Desert—Kor's comrades would have mourned but they would have been less uneasy. Atlan had given them the word: Kor had rashly tried to scale the Castle Cliff to the tower of the Princess, as no man had ever tried before. And the word was whispered that Kor had made it! He had actually done what was considered impossible! Atlan had walked hotly away from Kor and his mad project; but, comrade as he was, he had quickly changed his mind and followed Kor's tenuous spoor to the base of the cliff. He could not see what happened up there in the fog, but he had seen the Dracs fly off with Kor toward the Valley of Horror.

Night hung cool and crisp; the fires leaped high. There were five of them, forming a pentacle, one for each Purple Forest tribe. Sparks danced into the flint-struck arch of deep blue velvet above; flames flickered on the heroic shadows moving and laughing and talking of the day's battles. Great tankards of ale and mead were raised; now and then voices lifted in roistering song. The lissome girls of the tribes giggled apart, at the periphery of the warriors' seats of honor.

Atlan watched Liti moving lonely and forlorn along the perimeter of the flambeaux. He went to her.

“Where are you going?”

“Just—walking.” She bridled back just a little when Atlan's arm went around her. Her eyes drifted up, up, up at the stars burning coldly over their heads. “Maybe he is alive, still.”

Atlan's dark brows met. “With the blood-herds?” he growled. “After so many suns, so many drainings!”

Liti's lithe sun-sepia figure shivered under her *zelti* sarong. “Kor's strong. He will fight!”

“Yes, fight. And that is exactly why he is dead, Liti. You know Kor could never stand the thought of captivity of any kind, much less that kind. So, he fought them and they were forced to kill him. That's an end to him!” He bit off the last words sharply.

She turned her upslanted eyes on him, hurt.

“You can say that so easily?”

“That's our life. You know that. Sure I miss Kor. I always will. But you know the code by which the Heldens live. Our rules are simple. Do nothing cowardly; die first. Weep, but briefly. Tomorrow it may be your turn.” His large fight-tough hands were almost tender on her bare arms as he drew her to him. “Kor's brave deeds will be sung and sung again around the fires. They will inspire the young to braver ones yet.”

“I know.” Liti's moist eyes blinked upward at the stars. “The Care

Women say when we die we go up there—up to those other worlds. Which one do you think Kor is on? That small green star, perhaps?" She pointed, sobbing.

Atlan's hands bit her arms, suddenly savage. The torment unleashed in Liti's eyes brought a rush of hot blood to his brain. He had always loved her, too. Hopelessly, but as much as Kor did. More, he thought. At least he hadn't gone around moping about the Princess like Kor had.

"Liti," he grated, "you have had your time for weeping, but it's over now. I have been patient, and you know that I never once tried to change your feeling for Kor while he was alive, even when he—" He shook his dark head hard, to shrug away unkind remembrances. "We Helden are practical people. A woman does not live alone, mourning her dead. She chooses another. You chose me, didn't you? Well?"

Liti nodded. Her eyes flashed tenderness while she clung close, sobbing. "Forgive me, Atlan. I do choose you! I do love you!"

"Forget," Atlan admonished. "It will be easier. Be like the Helden woman who slew her man with his own sword for coming home from battle with a wound in his back. Be like steel. Kor would want this; and I—I will love you until the day I die."

There was a shout from the fires. Atlan was leader and he was wanted among the warriors. He yelled back that he was coming and pour him another *zelti* horn of brew. He kissed the girl gently.

"Don't wander too far from the fires. Remember the mockers."

Liti nodded and watched him rush away and lope to his hide-covered seat at the fore of his comrades. She sighed; too restless to return to the rest of the women and their small gossip, she ambled slowly toward the tangle of juniper and the dark wall of brush.

She moved out of the firelight, into the shadows. She found sleep hard to come by these nights and solitude was a boon. Alone she could remember and give vent to her grief for Kor in open tears. Helden women wailed ornamentally at the funeral ceremonies, but never cried. Liti was slim as a fawn, her dark hair twisted in a loose double-braid of burnished brownish auburn to her vine girdled waist; she carried her head erect as a young animal did; like a forest beast Liti was equipped with useful if unseen muscles; she was well adapted to an environment of outdoor living. Her moccasined feet padded across the sward with no sound at all.

It was as if something had called her to this particular place in the forest. . . .

Alone and comforted by it, her look moved upward again to the rich fields of stars. To her, Kor would always be up there. The Care Women had said it and what they said had to be true. She remembered with a nostalgic ache the song the Care Woman who had mothered her had sung:

*The sky is but a blue and tender sea,  
Where stars like silver ships upon it roam  
And wink and blink their dreams at you and me,  
To point the path that one day shall lead home.*

There was more, about the Watch-Gods like shepherds in the sky, always watching fondly down at whatever the Helden heroes and maidens might do, encouraging them to brave deeds and care in all they did, lest the Watchers should see them do a bad thing and be saddened by it. The Watch-Gods were surely all-beneficent, all-good! They had taken Kor to themselves, to one of their wonderful star-worlds up there. Kor would live forever there, with no more danger, no more battles to fight, no more

unreasonable daily perils to face. Kor was happy up there. . . .

Liti wept. Kor was happy and that he was brimmed her heart with a kind of inconsolable grief for herself. Atlan loved her as Kor never had, perhaps. Yet you could not change what was in your heart. While Kor was among them she could never love Atlan—yet she would now make him a dutiful wife and she would love him. Kor's memory would dim and she would love only Atlan. She would! It was for all this she wept.

The wrenching agony of Kor's suddenly being gone from her might be the very thing that made him the most desirable hero she could ever know. Must it be like this, every time she looked up at that small green star that drew her like a magnet—must she hide her pain when she demanded:

Are you the one? Is Kor with you?

A twig snapping in the blackest shadows tossed away her aimless dreams. Her inbuilt instinct for self-protection washed across her in a wave of adrenalin. Her hurt had brought her too far from the fires—hurt and something else, something very like Kor himself calling her! She was out of arrow-range of the night-fires; there were strange beasts lurking in the Purple Forest, drawn to the fires by their hunger.

Liti froze, hand on the small utility knife thrust under the girdle around her waist. She wished to run but something held her rooted to the spot.

She waited, unbreathing.

"Liti!"

It was Kor's voice! *Kor's voice!*

The sound cut through Liti like a knife. Animal fear vanished while she waited, trembling, immobilized.

"Liti!" The voice spoke urgently from the brambles. "Come deeper in. Closer. This is a dead spot. There aren't any cameras here. We have to be very sure!"

Liti gasped. Her hand waved on the knife. A mocker! Yes! That must be it! The mockers were the most dangerous of all the beasts of the Purple Forest because they had an uncanny ability to mimic human voices. But how would a mocker know her name? How? By prowling the circumference of the fires night after night, that's how. Listening. And this was not Liti's first indiscretion. There had been others; almost as if she had wished for death to release her from her pain.

She tried to speak his name but it caught in her throat. She stood riveted, hand on knife, waiting for something incredible to happen.

"Liti! It is me! Please come to me. Don't be afraid, Little Fish."

She gasped. How would a mocker know that? It was Kor's pet name for her, a name he had not used for more than five years because she asked him to stop. Many years ago, as children, it had been Kor-Atlan-Liti, wandering across the floor of the Purple Forest, swimming, food-gathering, playing. Liti had tumbled from her tree-perch when, tagging along after the two boys, she fell in a pool and Kor had fished her out, dripping and bawling.

"Little Fish who cried whenever I threatened to toss her into the pool."

Something deep within Liti was forced to believe. The stars had given back their dead. Speaking his name silently Liti glided between the thorny brambles into a deep, dark place like a cave itself. Then, unseen, Kor was with her. His hands had hold of hers; his lips were brushing her cheeks. She knew without seeing him. She sobbed his name and clung, as she had clung to him that long-ago afternoon when he fished her from the pool.

"You were dead! Atlan said the Dracs took you!"

"They did."

"You escaped!" Liti gasped. "You were the first to climb the cliff and you were the first to escape the Valley of Horror!"

"I had help," Kor told her. "Listen well to me, Liti. You must do something for me. This is very important. . . ."

"But—"

"Quiet, Little Fish. Listen!"

Liti panted against him, pushing back joy-shock and wonder in her effort to obey. Kor's voice was tight and compelling, telling her only what she must know in order to fulfill the task he set for her. What he asked her to do was terrible and it was unbelievable that a hero like Kor would dream of asking such a thing. Yet she must do it. For him she would do anything. Even this enormity.

While she listened, gasping from incredulity, her head bobbed. She would do it. Atlan would be there, too. She'd see to it. Then, all at once, Kor was gone. The pressure of his arms was still on her and along with it the echo of his last urgent demand: "*Hurry!*"

Liti stumbled back into the fire's oval, knowing how dazed and peculiar she must look, and hoping that this, too, would jigsaw into Kor's abomination. She sought out Atlan—it wasn't hard; he had been searching for her between horned flagons. She pulled him away from the other warriors.

"What is it? What's wrong?" he demanded.

"You know," she sobbed.

"Did something happen?"

"Something happened," she returned bitterly. "Kor is dead."

His mead-fuddled face pushed close to her. "What are you talking about? That happened weeks ago!"

Liti touched his cheek tenderly. "Atlan, I do love you. I don't understand how I can love two, but I do. But you must understand why."

"I know all about Kor," he grated. "But that's over!"

Liti sobbed. "Is it? It can never be over for me, Atlan."

He stared at her stupidly. "It's *got* to be!"

"Has it?" Her voice was a whisper.

"Sure! There is no other way!"

"Yes. There is a way." She brushed her lips across his, turned and ran.

Atlan's head was spinning from the foaming brew; blinking after Liti, the import of her attitude and her hints struck him suddenly with the impact of a Centaur's whirling mace. She had slipped away before he could grab her and now she was running in the direction of the stone wall and the Care Women's huts. The wall was forbidden. The cluster of Care Women's huts behind it was forbidden. As for the cave behind them. . .

There was only one explanation. To venture beyond the high wall that separated the Teachers' instruction compound and the learn-rooms from the children's playground and the houses of the Care Women—this meant instant death. No excuse was permissible.

*Liti had chosen death.*

Atlan called after her, then, knowing this was futile, he followed. He paid no heed to the calls and wild shouts behind: he followed after Liti with pounding pulse. Something inside of him said that if she must die, so must he. He had despaired of ever having her when Kor was alive, and now, after weeks of new hope, he had lost her again. Twice was too much. He climbed the wall as she had done and gazed into the starry instruction compound of

early mock-battles with hurt eyes until he caught a flash of movement as Liti sped across the children's playground, silent now in the night; he watched her wind like a sleek shadow among the beehive shaped dwellings of the sleeping mother-symbols and their charges.

From his post on the wall he heard a baby crying in nightmare. He shivered. Then he dropped down within the area of sacrilege, as Liti had done. His whole being rebelled to be doing this. It was suicidal death, but here he was. Liti left a ragged splotch of starlight where the hive huts ended and became one with the shadows at the entrance of the cave.

The cave was unguarded, save for the taboo. What killed was inside. . .  
Atlan gaped into the dark, shuddering repulsion.

"Liti! Come back!"

No answer. Only a hollow whispery echo where the cave's mouth belled out thirty yards in and down. Atlan wrenched one regretful look behind him, where the fires' glow shimmered on the high wall of Forest; then, with a gulp, he followed her into the cave.

## XII

**Liti pulled back** against the cave-wall and waited. To be doing what she was doing was an abomination in the eyes of the Watchers who were gods. The Care Woman who had served her as mother for those fleeting years of childish belief had said this and stamped it onto her soul with indelible ink. Her blood curdled in her veins to think about it. And to drag Atlan into such sacrilege—

"Liti!"

Atlan's hoarse whisper floated in, stirring the dark silence with a shaky spoon.

"Here I am," she whispered back.

She heard the crunch of his boots prowl down-tunnel until he reached her side. Her hands groped for the refuge of his warmth. Hers were cold as ice, like her heart. Atlan was blunt-voiced, rough-mannered; but he loved her. He was kind and good. A true hero. And now—for something that had no sense to it whatever, even if it *had* really been Kor and not some wild figment of her imagination—she had made Atlan a profaner of sacred places, too. Now, right now, she thought she loved Atlan more than she did Kor. He had followed after her, blindly, asking only to die where and when she did.

Liti crushed herself against him, sobbing.

"We've got to go back," Atlan told her. "There may still be time."

Something inside of Liti was like a goad. "No. We've got to go further into the cave. Kor is waiting."

"Kor!"

"Yes."

Atlan felt the girl slip away again, like quicksilver, moving like a puppet on a string that pulled her deeper into the half-round tunnel. There was nothing to do but follow. He swore bloody oaths at her and at Kor, too. But he swung after her, downward along the suddenly smooth floor of the long tunnel. A faint light silhouetted Liti, running, after what seemed a lifetime, the way his heart hammered from blind fear. The light came from odd niches in the smooth halfmoon of tunnel. His panic brought a sourness rising to his craw; still he ran after until the girl stopped, suddenly, frozen



with horror.

It came as sound, first. A thrumming dragon's roar that shook the walls. Some monster, worse than any they knew, was moving up out of the bowels of the planet to take them.

Liti sought his arms, bleating.

They waited.

"Run!" Atlan cried.

There was no time. It was on them in a blast of white lightning and a thunderclap that transcended the spectrum of audible sound. After the blindness had passed, they saw *it*. It was an elongated steel tube that quivered in a pool of virescent light that pulsed within a great round chamber, here at the core of the cave. The glaucous green shivered into calcimine, then livid purple, then dazzling alizarin and fuchsine and chrome orange and barium yellow. When it became white again, it began to fade.

Holding Liti behind him to protect her from the monster, Atlan pulled his sword.

"Here!" a voice cried behind them. "*Hurry!*"

Atlan accepted the voice as Kor's because he had been primed to miracles by Liti. Then Kor was with them, pulling them back into a side-cave set with banks of machines that cascaded with rippling lights. They were barely concealed behind one of these automatic transmission-of-matter bulks when the monster created a door in itself by simply dissolving half of its steel side. A ramp extended.

There was no time to discuss Kor's resurrection; his attitude urged severe quiet and their eyes were wide on what was happening in the chamber proper. First two men in green uniforms came out. Even their faces were green! With practiced efficiency and yawns of boredom, the green men went to work at their familiar task.

They gestured to others, two men wearing brown uniforms—with brown faces!—and these men pushed out a long cart with wheels on it, a hand-cart for the places where there were no machines and no power. The cart was long and covered with plastite (to Liti and Atlan it was the miracle of water that had been jelled clean and clear). The plastite formed a V, upside-down and hinged at the apex; on either side, under the glassy substance, were bin rows, tilted, and each bin held a sleeping baby swaddled in homespuns to match the Kingdom he was to inhabit.

The green men did some checking, then gestured the brown ones to trundle the cart after them, up-tunnel, in the direction of the cave mouth and the Care Women who would by that time be waiting to take over the babies.

"Quick!" Kor pulled them out of hiding. Atlan gaped to see now that his boyhood comrade was painted gold and wore a gold mesh tunic. When, from astonishment, he hesitated, Kor gave him a wide grin and a shoulder slap for encouragement.

"Like we used to say, 'close your mouth, the flies are thick in the Forest today!' "

"Kor—!" Atlan gulped down mingled emotions, including the ignoble one of stinging jealousy at the way Liti clung to the giant, silent, wide-eyed, pliant to his merest whim. At least, that was how Atlan read it—and it hurt.

"No time for explanations now, old comrade!" Kor slapped him toward the ramp and the entrance to the bowels of the steel monster. "It will take them the best part of an hour to distribute the children and get back here. We've got to make every minute count."

He hustled them up-ramp into the shiny guts. Atlan sucked in a sharp breath when another green man greeted them with a wordless signal of some kind, then made the ramp pull back in and the side of the monster whole again.

"Blue Tyler is one of us," Kor said, as if that made any sense. "So are the two teleport-operators on the Earth end. The monitor has been scrambled temporarily. One of our little 'breakdowns.'" He grinned and pushed them into seats, while Blue Tyler moved swiftly to his chair at the controls. "There will be more and more breakdowns, but we can't risk so many that we bring about a wholesale investigation and a reshuffling of the top-mechs."

"I don't understand, Kor." Atlan scowled uncomfortably around him at the shiny walls. His Teacher had conditioned him to suspicion of anything outside the narrow scope of

Forest life. Muscles and nerves tensed up. Atlan even neglected to notice that Liti had moved to a seat next to him, and had insinuated her hand into his, now that she was satisfied that Kor was alive.

"Of course you don't." Kor quirked a bleak smile, remembering how it was when Sena had first wakened him. "Don't try. After a while you will know what this is all about. You will suffer from knowing, as I did. But you will be made to understand the painful truth, then you will find out whether or not you are the stuff that true heroes are made of."

Blue Tyler's hands played the controls with virtuoso expertness; there was a moment of unbelievable horror when the very molecules of their beings seemed to be pulled apart, a suspension in time and space, then eternity opened a window for them, and Vicaria, the Purple Forest, the Care Women's secrets, the night-fires, and a thousand unfought battles—all of this was left far, far behind.

\* \* \*

Where Kor had Sena to hold his hand, figuratively, through the harrowing wrench between primeval childhood and brittle adulthood—Liti and Atlan had Kor. Which helped. He had grown up with them, shared what they had been, and if he told them what Jacob and Lorry and Jason were doing to them was right, then it must be.

They came through fine.

"I'm with you," Atlan said simply, when blatant idiocy became unrelenting reality.

"Liti?" Jacob asked formally.

"Of course. Women of the Forest follow wherever their men lead. It is our nature and, that at least, I do not wish to change."

"I think I like that." Sena smiled.

Kor anchored her arm under his and grinned. "Me, too."

Atlan moved an awkward arm around Liti. She would feel bad about Kor and Sena. But she would get over it. Maybe she was over it already. She had eyes. She could see how Kor looked at Sena and how the Gold girl looked at him. And she had plumbed the depths of Atlan's love by dragging him into the forbidden cave. Yes. These things happened in the Purple Forest, too. Together with the tremendous soul-switch of knowing about Vicaria and livideo, the fawnish wood nymph was suddenly a woman, suddenly emotionally mature.

But this was no time for libidinal byplay. There was work to be done and

time was of the essence. The Plan was pushing ahead and other Helden were needed. Force-fed cerebrally by Jacob's hypno-learner, beyond the overall false memory of the Prism world to specific information related to their performance of specific tasks, they were to be handpicked by Kor and Atlan from among those Forest heroes whom they felt would serve the rebellion best. They would "die" in various ways, managing always to do it in one of the less titillative dead spots, out of livideo camera range. They would be brought to Earth, trained to fit in, disguised, wherever they would do the most good.

"But why us?" Atlan wondered.

"Because you aren't coded," Jacob told him. "The great Prism banks have every man of every chromatic color range pinned down for instant location. One false move out of any of us and we've had it."

"But you have accomplished quite a lot. You do have rebs in many key positions."

"But not nearly enough. We have only skimmed the surface and every move we make is walking on eggs. Lorry is a big help in the Prism itself, and we have a few rebs there—thanks to her—who managed to jam the main monitoring ganglions from time to time. But every time we bollix a monitor or switch a tech for our purposes, we hold our breath and pray."

"Whereas, the disguised Helden can come and go without constant monitoring," Kor put in. "Don't you see, Atlan? Like I told you in the teleporter, we play it by electronic breakdowns. One of our Blue techs deliberately causes a defect in the arterial labyrinth of computers. But every defect causes a stink in the Prism. They want to know why so many!"

Jacob took over. "Had we felt we could risk more breakdowns, had we held enough key positions so that a general collapse of the machinery that keeps our Prism world functioning was possible, we would never have brought any of you here from Vicaria. That element of risk would have been unnecessary. The fact that your Helden will be un-coded will make it possible to fit them in anywhere they are most needed. Lorry and her rebs within the Prism will feed phony idents into the great central banks to cover them."

"Will our boys be able to handle these tricky jobs?"

Jacob flashed a tight look in Jason's direction. "It's up to Jason to see that the tech part of their education is adequate. Kor and Atlan will work with him in plotting out specific Helden for specific jobs."

"What about loyalty?" Jason asked dourly. He had always preferred machines to people; he questioned the advisability of bringing in physical-oriented outsiders at all, being as he was on firmer ground with his own kind.

His query made Atlan bridle. Kor held him back with a grin. "Don't worry about loyalty. Once a Helden's cued to a fight, he'll die before he will give an inch. And that includes torture." He laughed. "What you're going to have to do is hold our boys back. They're going to want to storm the Prism with war-towers and swords the minute they find out what His Goldness IX did to them and all of their kind." His amiability dropped to match the uneasiness of them all at mention of the true Prism world leader. "By the way, what about His Goldness? That is one thing you didn't brief me on. Who in this spectrum of a world is he, anyway?"

Jacob turned to Sena. "Suppose you make a stab at telling him, while the rest of us get fogging on the recruiting of more Helden? Atlan and Liti can catch up later. They've got enough to chew on just now."

When the others had left, Kor asked, "Well, Princess?"

"The reason you haven't had much briefing on His Goldness is simply that we don't know much about him ourselves!"

"None of you?"

Sena frowned cutely. "None. Well, maybe Gold Dorff. He is His Goldness IX's number one banana. He has charge of the Prism Psychs and the Psychs are the ones who condition our people, after they're pigmented. The Psych Department has absolute control of the mental behavior of the Vicarites, seeing to it that the titills are innocuous and won't rock the boat. Gold Dorff runs this whole area of the Prism, but it is His Goldness IX who runs Gold Dorff."

Kor scowled and helped himself to a slug of the golden stamina-elixir which Jacob kept around his mock-medieval chambers as a substitute for sleep—since the rebs had to trade rest-time for plot-time.

"Then this god-almighty Goldness of yours lurks somewhere in the heart of the Prism, faceless, formless—a kind of omniscient machine. . . ."

Sena shook her head, accepting half a graduated beaker of elixir for her own lagging psyche. "From the vague hints Uncle Dorff leaks out when I roll my goo-goo eyes and put on my nymphomaniac cretin act, I *think* His Goldness is human. But, when you think how the ancient tyrants, and the more modern ones too, loved to have their pussies on statues and posters and video and were always sounding off, even hiring press agents and wearing pancake makeup so they would look pretty—it is strange that His Goldness IX, the greatest totalitarian genius Earth has ever known, wants to be faceless, formless, unknown."

Kor grinned. "Maybe he's a pint-size pip-squeak whose ego demands that he remain mysteriously unseen to give him size and stature. Could be?"

"I don't think so." Sena's shiver was involuntary and the fright leaping to her stormy-seas eyes put a sheath of frost on Kor's nape.

"Why don't you?"

Sena moved herself about nervously. "I—I can't quite explain. I guess it is like some of the taboos and whatnots bred into your genes. His Goldness IX's utter infallibility is bred into ours. Everyone's. And it wasn't done by any genetics engineer, either. His Goldness is a symbol. A god. A creature of infinite power. Nobody knows what he looks like but something in my bones denies the idea that he remains aloof and apart in some holy of holies in the center of the Prism, pulling the strings that pull other strings *ad infinitum*—not because he is weak-chinned and round-shouldered. No. His Goldness is something incredible and—well, I guess you would have to say—monstrous."

Kor was impressed into paced silence. "If His Goldness is the kingpin of the Prism—that point within the Prism from which all of the colors fan out—then the thing to do is to get to *him!*"

Sena avoided his eyes.

"How would you go about doing that?"

Kor cracked his muscles while he considered. "Since Gold Dorff is his top banana I'd get cozy with him, first."

A smile's wisp tucked up the corners of Sena's lips. "Yes. Go on."

"Let me see. Well, I understand Gold Dorff is a rounder and a lech to end them all. So I would find myself a pretty girl and work my way into the Prism through her. Get her to wheedle the awful secrets of the charnel house out of Dorff and eventually get him to take her through the

fortress-complex itself. To his private apartment, perhaps. Then—His Goldness IX!”

“Sounds easy the way you explain it,” Sena said.

“Trouble is—where do you find a girl who looks like what Gold Dorff wants, who has got enough on the ball, plus the cast iron guts, to—” He cut off, staring.

Sena did a little whirling dance for him, ending in a finger-under-chin curtsy.

“Would I do?”

“No!” Kor glowered.

“I thought I had done pretty well so far. Paving the way. Getting Uncle Dorff to promise he would show me through the Prism. All these months of preparation for the main event.”

“Main event!” Kor growled. “I'm not going to let you do it! It's sickening and—dangerous!”

“Not your lily-white Princess?” Sena mocked.

“Be serious. It's no go.”

Sena put her lips up for a sizable kiss. She sighed. “I'm afraid that it is all too serious. And I'm scared to death. But—Kor! It's got to be me. It's *got* to! I did all the spadework for it, and I am still spading. Uncle Dorff comes over to see Father twice every week now, and I keep giving him the glad-eye and sidestepping his propositions to everything else except his getting me into the Prism. By the time the Plan is set and your Helden are spotted around in their key positions I'll have Uncle Dorff dragging me to the Prism, drooling. But I promise to be careful.”

“Careful!” Kor's voice was a leonine growl. He took hold of her fiercely. “I won't let you do it!”

“Oh, yes, you will. It's the only way.” She untangled herself from his bulging arms. “Now, I've got to go. Uncle Dorff is coming over again tomorrow and I must get my beauty sleep.” She turned in the doorway. “Anything you'd like me to tell Uncle Dorff for you?” she asked innocently.

Kor grunted. “Yes, this.”

He made the Sign.

### XIII

**Sena snapped on** her bedroom tel-vis in a welter of anxiety and impatience. She had waited such a long time for word from Jacob and it hadn't been forthcoming. Kor had been sent back to Vicaria with Atlan three times, recruiting. Each succeeding time doubled and tripled the danger. At the least hint of what was going on, Gold Dorff and the other bigs of the Prism would commit a wholesale reshuffling of all tech-personnel in key places and quite a number of them would just disappear. Kor would disappear along with Atlan and the new army of Helden techs—and if the teleporter happened to be snapped off betwixt, there would be a lot of new Helden dust floating free in some time-space limbo, forever. . . .

Something was wrong! It had been too long! Her job was to work Gold Dorff, but she had to know about Kor. She waited in front of the oval vid, nerves pulled tight, mouth a grim line.

Before Jacob could focus in, she cried, “Did Kor get back? Is everything all right?”

“Yes.”

"You don't look it," she cracked back.

Jacob's lean face darkened to old doubloons. "Never mind how I look. You ought not call me."

"Why not? I'm part of—"

"Things are moving to a head. We're all too busy for chitchat and we can't risk a single slip. It was—uh—the diminutive gentleman who was having you followed, not your father. He's had men here, checking on me. It's been a real drag and just one more fly in the ointment to keep me from doing my part as coordinator."

Sena wisped a smile at the "diminutive gentleman." Jacob could have added, "with a long beard and little red hat and a friend named Snow White."

"Sorry, dear. But don't worry about our little friend doing any more checking. I put him straight about our relationship just last night. Anyway, it's all set! I've pulled it off!"

Jacob's saturnine face lost some scowl. "You're going there? When?"

"Tomorrow night."

Jacob said, "Damn! That's too soon!"

Sena shrugged. "What could I do? He sprang it on me all of a sudden. I had to accept. After nagging him about it all this time! Shall I come down with a severe migraine and—?"

"No, no. We'll have to swing into action, half-cocked. Gold knows if and when we'll get another chance. I was hoping for another week to get the new bunch back, trained, and Kor—"

Sena's heart flipped. "Kor's not back! I knew it!"

Jacob nodded slowly. "But it's all right. Remember what happened last time. They had to lie low in a dead spot for three days, waiting for somebody to show. Then, after they did make contact, it took a while to maneuver the fake 'kill' and—"

"And one of the kills wasn't fake!" Sena murmured. "The monsters don't know what kind of games we're playing."

"It has to look good," Jacob reminded her. "The scanners at the Prism are cued to detect anything the slightest bit out of line. Kor and Atlan have had that riveted on their skulls. That's why this delay. They're not taking chances; the Helden who died was an old comrade-at-arms."

Sena's sea-eyes clouded. "If only I could turn on my livideo and see him, like before. At least know he's alive!"

Jacob's haggard look shivered when he fumbled with his off-vid switch. "Listen, Princess—this new development of you going to the Prism tomorrow night means I've got to prod everybody on down the line into action. A lot of it will have to be played by ear. We'll have to take a hell of a lot of risks. We can't wait for Kor to get back. We need him bad, but we'll have to move ahead without him and Atlan. So—" For just a second he allowed the compassionate fear for her to leak out. "This is ta-ta. Be careful. Good luck. And I hope I'll be seeing you later."

\* \* \*

Applying a glinting dust of what looked like real gold to her carefully seductive makeup, for a finishing touch, Sena stared at the face that looked back at her from her dressing-table mirror. Critically. This was it. Uncle Dorff must want her as never before, and behind the creamy pigment and the makeup her face was tight with strain, her aqua eyes stormed up with

dark clouds of fear. Fear for Kor. Where

was he? What could have happened? This was the longest he and Atlan had ever been gone. She needed the reassurance of his herculean strength, his heroic love, to give her the will to carry through her repulsive part in the rebellion. The thought of "Uncle" Dorff's flabby lips on her brought a convulsive shiver.

In a few minutes Gold Dorff's private air-car would pick her up and whisk her to the Prism. He would be waiting for her with lechery spilling from his pinched-up eyes; she must not let a trace of her repugnance show. She must play the seductive birdbrain to the hilt. For the last time. . .

*Kor. Kor.*

The tautness around her eyes increased. Sena's fingers trembled into the table drawer for a bottle of capsules Jacob had given her. "One every two hours, and only if the going is unbearable. A double dose and your heart will pop like a balloon. But only if you have to have it!" Sena had laughed. "I won't. I've got Kor."

*Kor. . .*

Gold Dorff's luxurious air-limo was fitted out in red velvet. Sena had slipped out what she had imagined was secretly; her father had, she thought, retired for the night. But her last forlorn glance down from the head of the ramp had been of Gold Ambon standing there in the middle of the black-and-white diamonds of the rotunda, looking up at her with miserable reproachful eyes. Sena had grown up, and the Prism world being what it was. . .

The plush limo swept up and away in the direction of the mammoth complex which controlled two hundred million lives.

Sena thought about Jacob and Jason and all the other rebs, hopefully ready at their posts, some already having started infiltrating monkey wrenches into the incredible network of machinery. Communications would go first. This would bring about confusion in bringing robo-repairmen to the scene when the other factions of the computer-code pattern started to fail. Lack of coordination between the various key factions would give the rebels time to do more damage. Jason's genius had used the robotic repairmen's limitations and ahumanness against them; deficiencies had been subtly built into them by reb-techs; it would take time to locate the sources of failure, and lack of intercommunication would move in the direction of wholesale pandemonium.

That was the Plan.

Sena's part was to keep Gold Dorff occupied during these crucial hours. And to locate His Goldness IX. It would not be easy. Gold Dorff was infamously clever under all that flab. He had to be.

When the air-limo dipped down and into the dark shadow of the windowless monolith, Sena gasped, acutely aware for the first time of just how huge and fantastic the Prism really was. It had to be. It housed all of the memory banks of all of the millions of inhabitants of the planet. It housed the birth-labs and the genetics controls. It housed all of the facilities for creating the creatures, human and quasi and non, for Vicaria's Seven Kingdoms, plus the labyrinthian web of livideo. It was the very core of the planet, the Prism apex from which fanned out the color-coded, computer-controlled livideo-sapped multitudes that made up this futureless civilization.

And, lurking at the heart of this heart—His Goldness IX.

Sena was amazed to find Gold Dorff himself waiting at the

Prism-workers' door to let her in. When the force-field dissolved under the personal code he had provided her with, there was Uncle Dorff, like a great fat Cheshire cat.

Yet, under his bland thick-lipped smile Sena read perturbation.

"Communications are balled up," he grunted, taking her elbow possessively. "Couldn't stir up anybody down here. Line was dead. Damn those muddleheaded Blue techs!"

Jacob's capsule had bounced Sena back to her old phony-scatterbrain self. She was on stage, now; a world might well depend on how well she played her part. "Never mind, Uncle Dorff, darling! I just know when they get the word that *you* had the inconvenience of having to come *all* the way down here just to meet little old *me*, those nasty old Blues will shiver in their booties."

"They will, they will. Heads will roll, never fear." But her continuous rattle of flattering conversation kept him off balance as he drew her along the main corridor toward the lift-tubes.

"How do I look, Uncle Dorff?" Sena demanded diversively. "I spent just *hours* making myself pretty—just for you!"

He gave her a chuckling pinch. "You'll do, kitten."

They reached the plastic up-tubes. Gold Dorff's was marked "Private." Sena giggled and squirmed deliciously close to him after they were in.

"Where are you taking me, you naughty old Uncle Dorff, you!"

"We'll skip Mnemonics," he decided, waving a pudgy hand at the radiating corridors like spokes flowing out from the elevator tubes. Floor after floor, in the passing, was crammed with the sealed memory-banks which idented the populace and kept constant check on their movements. Lights rippled across their mechanical faces; here and there Blues and superintended Browns with mobile robots moved down the serried rows.

"But I want to see every little thing. Just *everything*." Sena pouted, goggle-eyed with pretended comprehension of what it was all about.

"It's dullsville, kitten. Nothing whatever to amuse you until we move up to the baby decanters. Then I've got to check over the current livideo crop. You might as well come with me, see how monsters are whipped up."

"Well, if you say so, Uncle Dorff. 'Cause you're the big boss, aren't you? I mean, the *really* big—"

He chuckled and put his thumb on the fast-flow button. The levels blurred by like continuous lines on a copybook. When the counter read 380, Gold Dorff jabbed for stop.

From behind a transparent wall that dwindled to infinity fore and aft, Sena stared out on cubicles with beds in them. There were women in the beds. In this section the women were all Golds, and they were in the process of having their babies removed from them aseptically, by robots, while still in early embryo stage. Sena watched the odd inhuman lumps of "ripped untimely" flesh squirm down the endless white belts that moved the Gold embryos (they looked anything but Gold at this stage) to a section opposite, where the squirming lumps were dumped into the bottles which would serve them for mothers the rest of the way. The bottles were transparent, had feed-in tubes attached to them; Sena knew that the alleged "birth-ease" was not the real reason for denying natural birth. In these bottles the human embryos could be studied and dealt with, conditioned by chemicals and deprivational feeding to achieve the desired mentality and even the final functional use of the individual, long before the customary nine months gestation period was up. Remembering what



Lorry had told her about the callous secrets hidden behind this aseptic, super-efficient facade, Sena shuddered.

Gold Dorff caught the shrinking motion, chuckled. "I was going to show you the quick way but I won't."

"Quick way?"

"The base-colors. Browns and Blacks. These are Golds. They get the full treatment. But the Blacks, for instance, have—"

"I'd rather not hear about it, Uncle Dorff." Sena wrinkled her nose up at him cutely. "Who cares about dirty old Browns and Blacks, anyhow?"

"Spoken like a true Golden Girl," Dorff chuckled. "And I suppose you don't want to see the Browns get their spinal injections of alcohol for cerebral stunting, either?"

"No, sir, Uncle Dorff!"

"Fine. Up we go, to the monster factory."

When they stepped back in the up-lift, Gold Dorff's boredom brightened. "This whole section is my favorite," he preened. "It has piquancy, imagination, and when the genetics artists show any ingenuity at all, a deal of flair."

He led Sena, chattering, down several corridors, ending in another infinitely long room fitted with the genetics engineers' worktables. The white topped lab tables lining the central portion of the room in a double row were fitted with sinks and varied assortments of robotic machines specialized to the work of biochemical experimentation with living flesh. Blues were industriously occupied at the tables, since the Prism was a round-the-clock business without end or holiday. Browns performed lesser tasks, fetching and carrying to order, while Blacks cleaned up the refuse.

All three colors saluted Gold Dorff with the Sign as they moved along the tables. Gold Dorff's response was a perfunctory hand-wave; when he paused now and then to poke critically at what was being worked on at a given table, Sena tried not to look. The quivering flesh. The blood. The opened-up craniums, the organisms that *moved*.

"Whatever are they doing, Uncle Dorff?" Her smile was cretinic beyond belief. A second capsule kept it up there.

"This bunch here is making monsters for Kingdom B-1. That's your boyfriend, Kor."

"Not *my* boyfriend, Uncle Dorff!" Sena pouted, mock indignant. "Anyway, he's long dead."

*Dead. Kor was dead.*

"But how? I mean, *how* do they accomplish it, Uncle Dorff?"

"What you see here is bits and pieces. Each monster-maker is provided with basic raw material to work on; it's up to him to come up with something amusing."

"Honest, Uncle Dorff? Show me!"

Gold Dorff's puffed face took on a sadistic cast as he drew her across the room and pulled back the curtain opposite the tables nearest. Sena peeked over his shoulder, squealed and gave a delightful shiver of protest.

"Look! Look, Uncle Dorff! All those cages with animals 'n things in them! Gold above, did you ever see anything like it!"

"Frequently."

"Sure, silly. But look at the cute little lion over there with his hind end all wrapped up in bloody bandages. And that kangaroo! At least I *think* it's a kangaroo. Father took me to a wild place when I was fourteen." Her throat squeezed shut so that for a few minutes she couldn't keep up her

brainless rattle. Several of the occupants of the cages were almost human, at least human genes were admixed in their warped and twisted contours. One had a furry ape's face but large liquid eyes that looked up at her, mutely imploring release or death. Another had human hands; the rest of him was avian. Sena stared at the angry red welts where portions had been sewn onto other portions, at the way they crouched in abject misery or clung to the bars of their cages, trying to moan or howl, unable to because their vocal apparatus had been cut or strictured.

Dorff's grimaces were for a different reason. He was dissatisfied with the current layout of Vicaria fodder.

"Nothing very original here, I'm afraid. Most of these will end up in the furnaces. That one over there. The kangralion, I suppose it is. At least he is showing some fight. He has already mauled the other two tiresome creatures in his cage to death and he looks like he wants to maul me. The kangaroo's legs are for speed, no doubt, and of course the kill syndrome in his brain has been exaggerated. He'll do." He pulled Sena down the long line. "Having fun, kitten?"

"Wonderful fun, Uncle Dorff. I'm so glad those stupid Blues did *something* to please you!"

"Speaking of pleasing me," Dorff hinted, licking his lips, "we'll have a look at the cat-girls and the mermaids, and check the new snake-condor tryouts. Then maybe somebody else will do something to please Uncle Dorff, eh?" He pinched her arm. Sena tittered with effort.

She must grit her teeth and keep feeding Gold Dorff's ego by occupying him with his pets for the longest possible time. That was vital to the Plan. Sena permitted herself one more capsule if she was to stand the gaff; finally the charnel blood smells, the stench, the soundless shrieking distortions of the monsters' faces, the matter-of-factness of the Blues and Browns as they slashed and cut and sewed and hypoed, all of this pressed her down like a descending weight.

She fell dizzily against the man in the gold robe.

"Had enough, kitten?" Dorff gave her a little squeeze, rumbling out a self-satisfied laugh. "How about Circe's girls? We keep a few on tap. Might—ah—inspire you?"

"No, no more, Uncle Dorff. It's such a ghastly mess here. Can't we go someplace cozy where I can have a drink of something cold. I'm just burning all up."

"Very well. I know just what you need; it'll do the trick as well as the show Circe's sluts put on for me from time to time."

"Where are we going, Uncle Dorff?"

"Up to my office."

"Office?"

"My apartment is just behind it, kitten. You'll like my apartment. It's way out. Any kind of liquor your empty little head could wish for—and once I've locked the door, nobody can get in. *Nobody.*"

## XIV

**It was** bound to happen sooner or later. It had to. Not all of the Helden had Kor's mental equipment or resilience, nor did they have a fairy tale Princess shimmering on the horizon to override their natural (implanted) inclination to boggle and react at what they were unable to believe.

Young fist-faced Tokkil tore it. The other five were fine. They were older; they knew and respected Kor and Atlan. Nobody had seen Atlan follow Liti into the cave, as it happened, but there were guesses and conjectures about it. Seeing him alive, here in the dead-spot between cameras and audio and titill, was enough for them. One by one, they did what they were told. Each contrived a hand-to-hand combat just outside the shadowy fringe area of the dead-spot. That part of it was easy. The Purple Forest was *made* for fights like these. They were everyday occurrences.

Young Tokkil was the last.

Kor's mind was hot and heavy on what was happening on Earth, and on Sena. He remembered as in a dream darkly that young Tokkil had once challenged him for leadership of the Tribe. While the Helden were the results of finagling with genetics by Prism engineers, and were seemingly cut from the same cloth, not so. Not quite. There was always the off-shade oddball. After all, they were only babies when they were trundled up the ramp to the Care Women; a lot went on in the cranium as a result of individual experience. Environment counted for something and while this environment, plus their rigid training, made for warriors and feisty hunters, their lives were actually a little freer and easier than the lives of the code-controlled Earthites who titilled along. So young Tokkil wanted to fight Kor for leadership of the Tube. Well, that was all right, too. It was part of the titill. Kor had laughed him off good-naturedly, rather than kill the lad as he could have done, and now—

The resentment burned deep, even after a full year.

"You brief him," Kor told Atlan.

Atlan nodded. He took the youngster, a thick-set kid with a blunt chin, suspicious close-set eyes, and a brush of Mohawk-stripe hair, to one side. He had to make it short. If only there had been some way to fetch a hypno-learner here!

"What you do is get the creeper to tail you up on that blue ridge yonder. Look! No, don't keep looking at me, punk! Listen. The others didn't understand what it was all about, either, but they did what they were told. You'll let the creeper catch you up when you stumble. Pick a big one. Thirty foot. They're always hungry and a big one could down you in two bites. Now, in the skirmish you'll lose your sword, but you'll escape."

"That's nice," Tokkil grunted. "I thought maybe you wanted me ate."

"Cut the sarcasm. We haven't got time. I hope that I'm not assuming too much by expecting you to make it look good. You slide free, but you lose your blade. You run, in a panic. You run *this way*. The creeper follows you into the dead spot and from there on—well, there are seven of us to handle the creeper. We won't kill him. We'll rout him out with one of your boots dangling from his lower fang. A creeper, however big, wouldn't try to tackle that many. They like to catch 'em solo." He slapped the boy's shoulder for emphasis. "Think you can handle it?"

The eyes lidded. He shrugged off Atlan's hand sourly. "Sure."

"Good boy! You're the last one. Remember, it's all playacting, only this time you're the one who is faking. In a way you're twisting the tables on the titillers. When we hit Earth we'll really do some twisting! Catch?"

"No."

"You will." Atlan gave the youngster a heave in the direction of the ridge. "Move! Make it fast and beautiful!"

Kor consulted his timepiece every ten minutes; the wait was agony. And

the wait was in vain.  
*Tokkil never came back.*

\* \* \*

Sena's brainless chatter kept her from thinking or being sick on the way to Gold Dorff's plush apartment. The Psych-head's digs were on a higher level, near the top and the shielded center of the Prism. Gold Dorff led her through a succession of offices, then into and through his own private sanctum. He thumb-triggered an abstract mural out of the way at the room's end. A steel-alloy door slid back. It took all the nerve Sena could muster up to step through that door, and the decisive hiss-snap the steel made when it closed behind them was like the crack of doom.

All workaday was absent from Dorff's sumptuous living quarters. There was no evidence of livideo, but there was everything else to suggest sybaritic fun and games. Long low couches with white fur on them. A ten-inch red carpet. Erotic tri-di murals. A bar, toward which the fat man headed like an overstuffed bird dog.

"Drink?" The question was purely rhetorical. He was putting it forcibly in her hand and wrapping her fingers around it.

Sena giggled and touched the aphrodisiac to her lips. She sank back on the white fur and downy silk cushions.

"Uncle Dorff?"

"Yes, kitten?"

"All that blood and yick. It's given me the most *dreadful* headache. Could you get me something?"

Uncle Dorff scowled at having to remove his bulk from the couch and home base. Still, if the nitwit had a headache that wasn't so good, either.

"Whatcha doing, Uncle Dorff?"

"I am ringing for my man, Task." He waddled back and patted her arm, floundering down beside her.

"Task? What an odd name! And no color!"

"Actually, Task is not a man. He's an android."

"Golly-Gold!" Sena chirped. "I've never seen an android before."

"We haven't bothered to make many. Just the robot-mechs. Even they are much more expensive than human slaves. Nope. Nobody has yet come up with anything that will replace the human brain and facile human muscle, especially when they are conditioned and kept under strict control."

"Then why Task?" Sena asked innocently.

"Task is very special. Running errands for me is only part of his job, the unimportant part. In a way, Task is superhuman. He *thinks* and even emotes, I suspect, although Task is far too bright to let even me know what goes on in that amazing brainpan of his." He chuckled. "Still, His Goldness IX made him and he can unmake him, anytime his chemical components show deviation."

"He sounds dangerous."

"He is dangerous. Task was created to serve His Goldness IX. He is what was once referred to as a booby trap. His brain is keyed to fantastic electronic devices within the walls of the Prism. He guards His Goldness IX. Should anyone ever make the slightest move against His Goldness IX, the trigger-mechanism in Task's brain would set off a chain-reaction that would destroy the whole Prism."

"You, too, Uncle Dorff?"

Gold Dorff's eyes pinched half shut. "Yes. And the world, eventually, since every facet of the Earth is networked to the Prism."

Sena gasped. "Then I sure hope nobody tries to kill His Goldness IX. 'Cause if they do, they are destroying the whole entire world!"

Gold Dorff's shudder slopped some of his drink on his gold robe; Sena watched his eyes move involuntarily upward, upward toward his personal god and nemesis. He downed his long drink in one nervous gulp.

"Where the hell is he, damn him I"

He rang again and kept his finger on the button until a red light pulsed above the steel door. While Dorff's back was turned to trigger open the door, Sena dumped her drink in a jade-tree garden at the base of the subtle ornamental couch lamp.

The door slid open. Sena gulped back a gasp. It was Lorry. Her wide unpretty face was graven and respectful; the carat marks between her eyes had two explanations, one for Sena, one for the Psych-head. Her flicked glance at Sena said, *Good girl. Keep it up.*

"What are you doing here?" Dorff glowered. "You know' I don't permit anybody in my quarters except Task! He is the only one besides me who can open this door."

Lorry nodded blankly. "I'm not inside, as you can see. I am on the threshold. You kept ringing and I was unable to find Task. I believe that he is indisposed."

"Indisposed!" Dorff swore. "How could that be?"

"I don't know. It may have something to do with the communications system. The circuits have been erratic all evening. It is most—inconvenient."

"You are telling me what I already know!" Dorff blared. "The mess should have been cleared up by now. It's been hours! Get the top Blue-mechs working on it. Get Blue Jason Jones!"

"It is not my department, Gold Dorff, but I will go right to work on it if that's your wish." Lorry moved back a step. "Was there anything else?"

Dorff blinked at her, scowling. For a moment he had forgotten all about Sena. "Oh yes, get some headache medicine for the young lady. Hurry."

Lorry made the Sign and hurried off. She was back in five minutes with a small bottle of capsules. Dorff roared her away and tossed Sena the pills before he mixed more drinks. Sena stared at the closing door and gulped.

Gold Dorff handed her the glass and stared lecherously down at Sena. "Now, where were we? Take your pills and stop all that headache nonsense. Drink up."

Sena allowed him to paw her, contriving to spill her drink.

"You're so—so virile, Uncle Dorff!" she giggled. "Look what you went and did!"

The fat man chuckled, pleased by her overture of submission. "I'll mix you another."

"Let me do it, Uncle Dorff. You lie back and be comfortable. I'll fresh up yours, too, then we can *really* have some fun. Scotch, wasn't it?"

"Yes. The bottle with the Campbell tartan on it. Yours is the lavender decanter with no label."

Sena twittered behind the bar; her pose of scatterbrained ineptness made it easy to substitute grenadine for the sinister stuff in the decanter; they had the same cerise thickness.

She swiveled back, giggling up a storm.

"Now," she demanded cozily, "tell me some more about Task."

Dorff frowned. "I didn't bring you here to—"

"Please, Uncle Dorff? We've got oodles of time and it'll be that much more fun. . . ." She rolled her eyes and hoped she wasn't overacting. It seemed not. The fat man shrugged. Every word, every move this kitten made was flattering to his ego, and he had the ego to take it.

"Well, Task is the connecting link between His Goldness and myself. Task and I are the only ones who have ever seen His Goldness. I am the only *human*. Task was engineered to protect him, and I do his work."

"Golly-Gold!" Sena simpered. "Are *you* important, Uncle Dorff!"

"Yes." Over the rim of his glass, Dorff's lidded eyes turned to the furthest wall; Sena followed his stare and noticed for the first time an almost invisible break in the continuity of scarlet wall. Like a double-door. An elevator up.

Sena's concealed tension made her bold.

"What does he look like, Uncle Dorff?"

"Who—oh, *Him*."

"Couldn't I see him, Uncle Dorff? Just a quick peek?"

"Shut up, birdbrain!" The Psych-head's shoulders shuddered under the cloth of gold. A secondary portion of his perverted genius had been mulling over what Lorry had told him about Task being indisposed. Whenever this happened and it did, for the android was a one-and-only complex of sophisticated chemico-electronic components, Gold Dorff sweated blood. Task had to be made well and if somebody inadvertently touched off one of the destructor activators in Task's head. . .

Sena ran a pink finger over the fat man's knotted forehead. "Sorry, Uncle Dorff. Don't be angry with me."

"I'm not angry with you, kitten. I've got weights on my mind. I always have, night and day." He sounded almost wistful about it.

"Have another drink, Uncle Dorff. Here. I'll get them."

Two more drinks and fended-off plays, titters and idle sex-chatter to put him off guard—then Sena got back to work.

"His Goldness IX lives near you, here in the Prism, doesn't he, Uncle Dorff?"

He nodded, swilling rapidly.

"Up there?" Sena pointed.

"It's like a penthouse." Dorff's alcoholic haze made his voice thick and raw, but it was something else that gave it an undertone of latent horror. "Like a bubble within a force-field. Impregnable. I was only there once. Just once. But. . ." His lips moved over words that had been bottled up within him for a long time, but he didn't dare utter.

Sena pointed at the far wall, cutely shrewd. "There's a lift inside that wall. That's what you and Task take when he wants you to go up to see him."

She felt his whole carcass shudder convulsively. His breath was heavy and fast, as if his heart had been strictured by a heavy invisible hand. He rose heavily, lurched to the bar and poured out a triple Scotch. He poured it down his throat.

Sena cooed away, sipping her harmless syrup. "—And you're in charge! Golly-Gold, Uncle Dorff, I'm so *proud!*"

"I was lucky," he said bitterly. "I think."

"That ugly little Blue woman who brought me the headache pills said Task was sick. What do they do when an android gets sick?"

"Sometimes they have to cut him open. Check the electronic phasing."

Hell, I don't know! My line is human psychology, not cybernetics."

"Anyway," Sena soothed, "everything will be all right in no time, I just know."

"I wonder how small a thimble you'd have to find to contain what you know," Dorff grunted.

Sena didn't recognize a slur when she heard one. She rattled on, "Uncle Dorff, what if His Goldness decides he wants to see you? What does he do?"

"He never does. Only that once, when I was put in charge. It's been over twenty years."

"But he might, Uncle Dorff."

Dorff laughed without humor while his shaking hands poured out another triple Scotch.

"What makes you think so, birdbrain?"

"I just happen to think so, that's all."

Dorff's preoccupations and all this chatter about His Goldness were driving away all of his sex-passion. Nothing had worked out quite the way he had planned it. Still. . . "Sena," he said grimly. "I think it's about time to finish up and get you back home so that I—"

"Uncle Dorff."

"Now what?"

"Look! Up over that hidden elevator in the wall! There's a little light up there that keeps flashing on and off. On and off. On and off."

## XV

"**Where in hell** is Tokkil?" Atlan fumed.

"Maybe he played it too close," one of the others suggested. "Those creepers jump fast."

Kor stopped his pacing. "I doubt it. Tokkil is inclined to be a show-off; he doesn't want to play if he can't be top dog, but the kid's sharp. No." He shook his head decisively.

"I didn't like the look on his face when we told him," Atlan said.

"Nor I. He's still rankling about what happened when he challenged me." Kor shot a look at his timer. The red reminder line was beyond alert to "*Danger—Return.*"

"You think he cut back to tell the whole village?"

"What else?" Kor grated. "Leadership is up for grabs since you left, and he wants it—bad. Making himself important by bringing back as fantastic a tale as he's got to tell will make him the center of attention, to say the least."

"But they won't believe him!"

"Maybe not. But Hake—Mollin—and the others are here. That'll make them wonder. *And* the eyes and ears and titills of a million Helden fans will be with him, all the way."

Atlan whistled. "Not to mention the livideo checker-uppers in the Prism!" He gestured the five recruits closer. "What do we do, Chief?"

"We strike out for the cave and the teleporter."

"What if Big-Eyes-and-Ears gets there first?"

Kor grinned. "Pray, comrades. Pray."

\* \* \*

Sena couldn't sit still after Gold Dorff had disappeared into the wall. He had refused to allow her to leave. She moved restlessly among the libertine artifacts for a while, then ran to try to open the secret door out. Hunting for secret trigger-mechs and finding none, she began to panic. Where were they? Jacob and the others? She had played her part of nitwit sexpot to the hilt, pulling out all the stops—almost. They ought to be here by now!

*Somebody!*

"Kor," she moaned. "Kor"

"What do you think you are doing?"

She whirled sharply. It was Dorff, standing in the open elevator, watching her. His voice rasped and shook, not wholly out of surprised anger.

"Uncle Dorff," she bleated, quite truthfully, "I'm scared."

His face, from Scotch and roiling emotion, had turned an odd purple-orange. His jowls flopped. His hands made futile motions.

"He—he wants to see *you*."

"He? His *Goldness*?"

"Yes. He has heard about you from Task. I keep forgetting that damned android has built-in snoopers and mind probes. It never occurred to me that Task was programmed to check up on *me!*"

Sena's nerves did a twist. She shot a frantic look at the open elevator, then at the sheathed door out of Gold Dorff's sex trap. This was something nobody had dreamed of. The worry was getting her in and locating His Goldness. Dorff's laugh was like crumpling paper.

"There's no way out, kitten." There was a kind of warped sympathy to the fat man's rasp. "Come along. His Goldness IX doesn't like to be kept waiting."

Sena began to babble. She must gain time. *Surely* Jacob and Jason must have infiltrated the Prism by now, with Lorry's help. Task's infirmity had to be their doing. . . .

"If I could only fix my makeup a little," Sena maundered.

"Uh-uh. His Goldness said *now*."

Something had gone wrong. . . .

*Kor!*

Her fingers shook when she fussed femininely with her flamboyant red chiffon scarf; she contrived a cretin's titter flouncing into the elevator with Dorff's heavy hand insisting from behind. When the door sucked shut, the lift thrummed just barely within audible range. Her heart stopped when the elevator stopped.

The doors flicked back abruptly. Sena stared at the Holy of Holies wide-eyed. What she saw was innocent enough on the face of it. A small, oval, pleasantly pastel chamber, perfectly empty of furnishings (as if whoever lived there didn't need chairs or tables or ashtrays) with a black floor so sleek that it seemed as if no feet had ever walked on it. Not ever. There were no windows. The only noteworthy phenomenon was that at its far end, belling out convexly, was a curtain; this curtain hung from floor to ceiling, beyond, actually. It was deep green; while of cobweb-sheer fabric of muted sheen, the curtain's folds were so close that only a vague shadowy glow of light came through.

The curtain shook slightly.



Something about its tremble made Sena's soul tremble, too.

In the outer space silence Sena heard the sound of her heart when it started beating again. It roared on her eardrums like thunder.

The vague light behind the shivering curtain allowed her to see the moving shadows behind it take shape. Strange shape. The shadow bulked closer to the curtain. It was huge and when it moved it made a dragging sound and its puffing breath shivered the curtain again.

His Goldness IX spoke.

"You can go, Dorff," he said.

"The girl?"

"I have seen her. She will be the one."

Sena couldn't move so much as a muscle. She was wide-staring stone. Dorff's heavy hands prodded her forcibly out of the elevator. When she pulled her look from that liquid echo of a voice behind the curtain and glanced back, she gave a forlorn moan. The elevator was erased; Dorff was gone. The wall was blank. It was as if in the universe only she existed—she and that squamous voice behind the curtain.

There was, when His Goldness IX spoke again, an ancient weariness in his voice, the totality of boredom.

He said:

"Would you like to see me, girl?"

Sena could only gulp.

The voice went on:

"I am—different. How? Because I am not only one person, I am nine. You see, I am all of the other His Goldnesses who have lived and ruled over this planet for nearly one thousand years. Yes. We are human. Did you know, Gold girl, that when a human dies, all of him does not die? Only part of him. The diseased or defective parts. Even in this so-called enlightened era of replacing worn-out organs and so on, there is always a vulnerable part that finally gives way and renders the rest of the organism null and void. The rest of the organism is perfectly capable of going on indefinitely, if it is fed properly and the defective parts are replaced, either by artificial organs or by an on-grafting of new tissue.

"Nine hundred years ago, when His Goldness I ruled, he decided not to die. He decided to keep right on living, to form a dynasty to end all dynasties—instead of passing his kingdom on to his son and so on down the line, he would *be* his son and his heirs, to whatever extent that portion of his body and brain which did not sicken and die would respond to new blood and new tissue-grafting. You would not understand it if I told you about all the experiments he conducted. A whole section of the Prism was dedicated to discovering what would keep His Goldness alive, incorporating his son and his son's son *ad infinitum* into his own multiple person. It seemed that artificial organs were not enough. There had to be new human tissue, as well; so why not *himself*, as perpetuated by his own son and his son's meticulously selected mate? After all, every man feels that he lives on through his children; why not do it in truth and no mystical nonsense?"

The windy voice retreated for a long moment. Sena held herself from crumpling by some inner strength of will that resisted her impulse to die, here and now. While it was considered irreverent and even dangerous to speculate on who the mysterious His Goldness IX really was (and what), like everyone else with a brain, Sena had wondered and spun great fantasies about it in the night. But *this!* The truth was more incredible than anyone could have dreamed!

"Therefore," the sougning voice continued, "one ought correctly to refer to us as His Goldness I-II-III-IV-V-VI-VII-VIII-IX. Yes. Part of His Goldness I's mind still lives within our organic totality. We who are nine living within this somewhat human body continue to exist. We think a lot. We have thought of everything and have dismissed most of it as beneath contempt. We are very bored. We are not wicked or monstrous, although we might seem to be to a small brain human such as yourself. Of course we must protect ourselves from the stupids (we include everyone in this category) so we remain here in inviolate seclusion. We are carefully fed and when the deep gulf you call death yawns, we retreat into a sphere of intense cold, where we recuperate. Every hundred years we require new blood."

Sena's parched lips moved, finally. "What—what—do you—want—from—me?"

"What we just said. New blood. You realize that if there is to be a His Goldness X there must be a female to produce him. It is time. Do not flatter yourself that we find you attractive or that we desire your body in the way Dorff does. We are beyond all that. It is a matter of little importance who mothers the next Goldness, but she must be of good stock, healthy, and of the correct blood type, et cetera. Through Task we have examined your genealogy back for many generations; we find you acceptable."

Sena gave a sharp cry. The weird shadow was right at the curtain now. Even its silhouette was a thing of horror. As to what His Goldness was saying. . .

"Come closer, female."

Sena couldn't move. Since there was no method of egress from this nightmare, she just stood there, hoping by effort of will to cease existing.

"It is an honor, female," the tempest-voice told her. "We require new life. The life-fluids in the pool behind me keep our body and our mind active only so long as we remain in it or very near it. But we have found that every now and then a new burst of life-cells is vital. The whole procreation process is loathsome to us, too, believe us. You will live here with us by the life-pool. You will be fed special foods. The embryo within your body will be under constant surveillance until it can be removed without harm and grafted onto us. Think what a wonderful thing you will have created out of your body! An undying ruler of this world! Is that not something marvelous, to an emotional human such as you? As for His Goldness I-to-Infinity, we exist only to continue to exist. It has come to be a habit, which, however, we have no wish to break." The torrent of wind deepened to a growl. "Come, female. There is no second choice."

Something that was not curiosity pulled Sena across the black polished floor. The combined power of those nine incredible minds, no doubt. She moved up to the curtain. Suddenly, without sound, the curtain whipped to either side. Sena saw them. She tried not to shriek.

## XVI

**The tricky place** was an open run along cliffs to the Care Women's barracks. Through Lorry's access to Vicarian charts, Jacob had mapped out Kor's recruiting route to a fine point, yet this stretch of vulnerable terrain could not be avoided. Luckily, the Forest Helden gave the barracks' wall a clean berth, from the taboos; consequently, few home titillers aimed

themselves this close to the cave's dead area. Nothing doing here. But, as Atlan had said, the Prism's walls of auto-cameras kept a constant vigil on all livideo areas to spot mechanical failures and for other reasons.

Kor halted the party under trees, parting the wide blue fronds for a panting look-see.

"How is it?" Atlan demanded, close behind.

"Clear, so far. Wish I could see around that log wall."

"Care Women's quad? Not likely! Even Tokkil hasn't got the guts. Let's make it!"

Kor grinned. "What else? Our notched pole ladders are still there. We'll have to sneak through the Care compound." He turned. "Men, I know how it is with you. Something makes the idea of scaling that wall and dropping down onto that forbidden ground impossible. But you've got to do it! Atlan and I have done it. Seven times. Tokkil delayed us, so it's almost dawn. The Care Women will be waking to feed the kids. We hope none of us will be spotted, but if we are—*keep going*. We've got to make cave and the teleporter before Tokkil—"

"Kor! *Look!*"

Atlan's cry spun Kor. He followed Atlan's point, swore. Moving grimly around the unseen curve of compound wall was a determined party of Helden, Tokkil leading.

"Now what?" Atlan grated.

Kor gestured widely. "Come on."

The new recruits held back. "You mean, fight our own comrades? Tokkil, maybe. He's a bragging loudmouth. But the others—"

"There's no other way. The insomniacs will have a titilling ball, but we have no choice. Do we?"

The man pulled out their blades. Kor led them out into open field at a lope. He winced at the idea of cutting down his own kind, confused into action by Tokkil, even to the point of skirting the sacred walled area. The camouflaged pole ladders had convinced them. Their looks, their upraised swords, told Kor they would defend the Care Women to the death.

Even at that, the party was not large. A dozen or so. The others hadn't believed or had preferred their sleep.

The battle began, swords smashed swords. But it was halfhearted, on both sides—and even if they won out against the two-to-one odds, it would take *time*. Time was something they had none of whatsoever.

*Sena. . .*

The thought of her with Gold Dorff had dragged Kor's feet all this long difficult night. Now it put an edge of fury to his thrusts. He picked Tokkil. It wasn't hard. Tokkil's soul had seethed long for the manner in which Kor had derided his leadership challenge.

"Atlan!" Kor panted aside, while he fought. "Tell them I make them *know!* Show it to them!"

Tokkil's bottled-up hate kept Kor's sword and mind wholly occupied, so it was for Atlan to pull the electronic blaster out of his tunic: one of the weapons Jason had created out of old Prism library drawings Lorry had photographed for him. Covered, Atlan demonstrated what the blaster could do—on a nearby tree. This was something Kor had hoped not to resort to, but there was no time. Panicked by the booming lightning—surely a thing from the Star Gods themselves!—Tokkil's companions scattered.

As for Tokkil, he chose death by Kor's regretful blade.

\* \* \*

Jacob himself met them at the Earth terminal.

"What kept you two?" he demanded.

Kor grinned. "It's quite a story, but if you—"

"Never mind! We're off to the Prism."

"We had to play it wide open at the end," Kor told him, climbing with Atlan and the others into the waiting air-car. "What's all this? How come our battle up there wasn't spotted? What gives?"

It was Jacob's turn to smile a tight frosty smile. "We have not been sitting on our hands, either. Since Sena went to the Prism with Dorff, we had to shoot the works. It's now or never. As soon as Lorry radioed me that Sena had Dorff nicely tied up we stopped horsing around and cut all communications. We have our mobile talkies that Jacob dreamed up. They have nothing. The network's been cut, That's what saved you."

"Sena?" Kor demanded.

Jacob shook his head. "Don't know yet. Task is the only one who can get into that room and Jacob is working on him at present, trying to get the key to that and to—His Goldness."

Lorry's rebs, stationed at key points in the Prism, directed them to the small lab where Jason and two assistant med-techs were working on the android. Kor gulped at sight of the ten-foot humanoid with his wire-and-tissue brains exposed.

"How long will it take?" he demanded.

Jason looked up, his perspiring face cranky at this interruption. He motioned Lorry to swab the sweat off his forehead. He pushed out a sigh of vexation. "This is something wild. Lorry swiped us some of the med records but mostly the initial blueprints to his construction"—Jason smiled sourly—"were destroyed."

"His Goldness wanted only one Task and no key. Then how in hell—?"

Jason nodded at one of his assistants. "Luckily Modoff here was in at the creation. The genius who designed him conveniently died soon after. But Modoff remembers a lot. Without him it would be hopeless. Task's functions are to serve His Goldness, to protect him—even from Dorff. There are protective devices built into the Prism walls, keyed to Task, who is programmed for suicidal all-kill. If I happen to touch a wrong ganglion this whole place and probably the whole world will go up in a cloud of dust."

"Try not to," Jacob suggested.

Kor grabbed Lorry by the arm. "Sena? Where is she?"

Lorry shook her head. "I can take you up there, but you can't get in. Only Task—"

"I can try!" Kor cracked out. "I can't just stand here. Coming, Atlan?"

Atlan nodded. They followed Lorry out of the room. Kor appropriated the blaster in case they ran into trouble, but Atlan preferred his naked sword. It was part of his arm. Nearing Dorff's suite of offices they surprised two prowling officers. Kor's spitting blast took one; Atlan's bladed rush and Helden war-cry put the other in a corner, bleating primal fear. The sight of livideo become real was too much for the Brown. He collapsed in a cringing heap at Atlan's feet.

Kor shouldered brusquely through the three outer offices, oblivious to the bulb-eyed gasps of the meek workers at their desks, still busy at mundane tasks. Lorry led him to the wall and the mural that concealed the

door to Dorff's den. He pulled out his sword and hacked away at it. Nothing.

"It's no use," Lorry told him dolefully. "We'll have to wait for Task."

"What if—" Kor couldn't say it.

He tried the blaster. Again, nothing. The door was proof against everything, save the tactile presence of Dorff himself or Task. It needed something related to them personally, some intimate individual aura, to trigger the lock. What?

Finding the answer would take an infinity of hit or miss trying. There wasn't time. . . .

Kor's giant body stiffened into steel, then sagged limp with frustration and despair. Sena was in there with Dorff. And, through all the pandemonium going on elsewhere in the Prism, they had stayed put. Dorff had designed his sanctum for just such tête-à-têtes, and short of alarms which the severed arteries of communication had rendered impossible. . .

*Princess!* Kor's mind cried, in taut agony. *Princess!*

It was like before, like all of those remembered nights when he had called to her and she to him.

*Princess.*

Came an answer. Hope flaying a raw nerve or—?

*Kor!*

Mind cried out to mind, as it had before. The device Jason had planted in Sena's brain was still there and it responded to Kor's compelling agony. Sena was calling to him. Her despair pierced his mind like hot steel. Before he had had other matters muddling his brain; now—just now—the totality of his own heroic demand for an answer, the fear which stripped his brain of everything else but this one single *must*, interlaced their two minds.

He floundered questions at her.

*Princess, where are you?*

*Penthouse. Force-field bubble. His Goldness.* There was loathing in the vibration thrumming across his brain. Terror.

*Who is he?*

*Kor, he is monstrous!*

*What can I do? How can I get to you?*

*You can't. There is no way. He is making me go down with him into the pool. His combined brain has the power to force me to him.*

*Pool?*

*The fluids in the pool are what feed him and keep him alive. I—I can't . . . Goodbye, Kor.*

*Wait! There's got to be a way! I'll find it! Hold on!*

*There isn't any way. Goodbye. Love. . .*

The bond between them snapped.

## XVII

**The voiceless** voice faded; Kor snapped back to his rage of helpless agony. There had to be some way to get to her. Dorff was no longer the threat. It was His Goldness now, and a million times worse! He whirled on Lorry and Atlan, who were staring at him with gaping mouths, as if he had suddenly lost his mind.

"She said something about a pool," he mumbled.

Lorry touched his knotted arm. "*She said—?*"

He nodded absently. His mind was battling, unable to quite hold onto

some evasive glimmer of hope. A hint. Unknowing, Sena had provided a clue.

He grabbed Lorry's arm. "Where does the fluid come from?" he bellowed. "It has to come from someplace, probably outside of the force-field. It has to be engineered and mixed and fed into the pool. . . ."

"Kor! What are you talking about? What pool?"

He blinked at her. "Even you don't know about that. But you must know something—something you don't know you know."

Kor dragged her out of the offices and down the corridor toward the up-lifts. Atlan toddled after, sword tight in hand. While the tube's pancake pushed up, Kor told Lorry what he had heard. Lorry's alarm did an about-face.

"Something none of us here in the Prism was allowed to even suspect. A life-pool that feeds His Goldness. Of course no one gets through the force-field that protects him. But he has to be fed!"

"We've got to find it," Kor grated. "Someplace near the center top of the Prism is the feed-in. Lorry, you know the Prism as well as anybody except Dorff. Think! Think hard!"

"I'm thinking." Lorry frowned. "Wait! There is a plan of the mezzanine near the blanked-off levels of the Prism. I've gone over them and gone over them, with a fine tooth comb, memorizing them so that I could draw them out for Jacob and the others. The blank space is His Goldness'—but that mezzanine."

"What about it?"

"There's got to be a feed-in, as you said. This mezzanine has to be it! Supposed to be experimental. I even peeked in once. Great vats. Mixers. A test lab with a crew of six or seven biochemists, two on shift at all times." Her eyes flashed. "Oh, yes. Something else. These bios keep to themselves. They're incredibly old and—and *they are all deaf-mutes!*"

A spiral staircase around a steel shaft led to a catwalk. It was a between-floors cul-de-sac, tucked away in the labyrinthian mazes of the great complex. Kor pounded ahead down the metal passageway toward an innocuous looking door. It was locked. Kor waved for Atlan; together they flung their muscles at it. Three heaves and the lock inside burst.

They were in.

Along one side of the deep curved room were a dozen enormous vats, color-coded, fitted with pipes and valves and indicators for reading volume, temperature, density. All of this led them to a great bowl-shaped automatic blender at the far end. At a neat lab table two wizened Blues were hunched over their routine precis of hand-testings and correlations of the chemical substances. The two blinked up owlishly at such an improbable event as company in this secret lair. One of them reached nervously toward an alarm button. Atlan yanked the little Blue up from his stool and put his swordtip to the man's scrawny Adam's apple.

"No matter," Lorry said crisply. "The communications are dead, all of them."

Kor grabbed the Blue's shoulder and shook him impatiently. "Which pipes feed the pool? Quick!"

The ancient gasped and floundered, indicating that he could not speak.

"They don't know what they're doing," Lorry said. "Nobody knows what happens to what, here in the Prism. They're conditioned and trained to do a job and that's as much as they know about anything. These Blues are geniuses on one level only. They have the technical know-how to do their

job, nothing else.”

Kor dropped him and ran toward the neat crisscross pattern of coded pipes leading into the walls. “Come on! Get busy! Grab yourself something heavy and start smashing!”

His urgent fear for Sena's immediate safety demanded hot and heavy action. Lorry set about turning every valve in sight off, but Atlan and Kor scorned the scientific approach. They found themselves appropriate lengths of heavy metal and went to work on the heart of the lab—the round mixer. It was plastite of some kind. It didn't smash easy. Kor's onslaught sent shudders up his arms as the cutting metal bounced off. Atlan worked the other side. They battered it grimly until a seam cracked in abrupt, skittering ice-jags; a trickle of green-yellow liquid oozed out, first a smear against the curved side of the great chemical blender; then, under more and harder batterings, the crack jumped wide. With a protesting plop, the droning pressure from within let go. A river of pungent liquid spurted over the floor along the seam-crack, became a plunging cascade that washed across the concrete floor and down the metal catwalk.

“I'm going back up there,” Kor announced, slipping and sliding along with the viscous mess as he headed for the spiral stairs.

He didn't look back to see them follow.

Once again at Dorff's impregnable door, he pushed his mind toward Sena. Nothing. He groaned. He bashed his bulk against the barrier in a frenzy.

“She's dead,” he grated. She must be dead. There was no answer, and every molecule of his brain's esper power was pushing out in wild search.

A burst of voices through the outer office doorway turned him.

“Jacob! Jason!”

They moved in rapidly, with somebody else whose hairless pate brushed the top of the doorjamb. Task. Kor whipped a look of hope in the direction of the android's clean, impassive, *human-coded* face. Ironic, that. In a world that sprayed out from the Prism in all the colors of the rainbow—the single non-human had a flesh-colored face. His Goldness had a sense of humor.

“Open up the door, damn you!” Kor's voice was a snarl of impatience.

With something that very much resembled contempt, Task brushed Kor aside. At the door he stopped; there was no change whatever in his cool placid expression. The mere touch of his hand on a certain part of the wall and a concentration of cerebral effort behind those gray eyes were all it took. There was a distant whine of unseen mechanics and the door swung open.

Task turned to Kor and nodded.

“After you,” he said gravely.

Kor growled like an animal when his eyes swept across the subtly lecherous apartment. Dorff himself lay on one of the cushioned couches, stupid and sodden, an empty bottle of Scotch fallen from his drooping hand. Kor crossed the room, yanked him up and slapped him until the pouched eyes blinked open.

“Where is Sena?”

Dorff's petulant display of horror included all of the others who were pouring into his private sanctum. When his bleary eyes caught sight of Task, they brightened just a little. He made an effort to cry out to him for help. But the android paid no attention to Dorff; he moved across the thick carpet toward the penthouse elevator in a straight line.

The elevator whined upwards. The door to His Goldness IX opened to Task's tactile trigger. Kor flung himself across the shiny black floor toward the open curtains and the concentric steps leading down to the pool.

Sena lay halfway down those steps, unconscious. Kor picked her up and cradled her with clumsy gentleness. She was all right. She *had* resisted. Her tunic was claw-torn. But proximity to His Goldnesses had finally flung her senses into the sanctuary of coma. Her eyelids fluttered. Fear leaped, naked and all-encompassing, but when she saw that it was Kor, she fell sobbing against him like a child wakened from nightmare.

Kor's eyes swung to what all the others were staring at.

His Goldness.

The creature who had created a dynasty within his own body lay gasping for ebbing life in the empty pool. His Goldness I-Through-IX was a grotesque, knobby, mottle-hided creature with many arms and many legs that flopped and floundered and dragged from one pool in-vent to another, slobbering with incredible mouths at the few remaining drops of life-fluid that hadn't drained off under Kor's onslaught.

Kor joined the others in a shudder.

His Goldness IX had many heads and way too many eyes. He was a patchwork quilt of human tissue. There were necks where necks ought not to be. There were blobs of hanging flesh that didn't know what else to do so they just hung there. There were legs so atrophied that they were one-toe or two-toe tentacles.

Some of the eyes detected Task, among the interlopers. Task. His specially-made protector from the world His Goldness had outraged.

"Help me," the squamous voice ordered thickly. "Get—food. Then—*kill*."

But Jacob's genius and perhaps something else that had been burgeoning within that mysterious android's brainpan for a long time made the android stand where he was, unmoving, impassive. Then, slowly, very slowly, that flesh-coded face of Task's created his first smile. Mona Lisa wasn't in it.

—The End—