



The Silk and the Song

Fontenay, Charles Louis

Published: 1956

Categorie(s): Fiction, Science Fiction, Short Stories

Source: <http://gutenberg.org>

Also available on Feedbooks for Fontenay:

- *Rebels of the Red Planet* (1961)
- *The Jupiter Weapon* (1959)
- *Service with a Smile* (1958)
- *Wind* (1959)
- *Atom Drive* (1956)
- *The Gift Bearer* (1958)
- *Disqualified* (1954)

Copyright: Please read the legal notice included in this e-book and/or check the copyright status in your country.

Note: This book is brought to you by Feedbooks

<http://www.feedbooks.com>

Strictly for personal use, do not use this file for commercial purposes.

Alan first saw the Star Tower when he was twelve years old. His young master, Blik, rode him into the city of FaMyn that day.

Bilk had to argue hard before he got permission to ride Alan, his favorite boy. Blik's father, Wiln, wanted Blik to ride a man, because Wiln thought the long trip to the city might be too much for a boy as young as Alan.

Blik had his way, though. Blik was rather spoiled, and when he began to whistle, his father gave in.

"All right, the human is rather big for its age," surrendered Wiln. "You may ride it if you promise not to run it I don't want you breaking the wind of any of my prize stock."

So Blik strapped the bridle-helmet with the handgrips on Alan's head and threw the saddle-chair on Alan's shoulders.

Wiln saddled up Robb, a husky man he often rode on long trips, and they were off to the city at an easy trot

The Star Tower was visible before they reached Falldyn. Alan could see its spire above the tops of the ttornot trees as soon as they emerged from the Blue Forest Blik saw it at the same time. Holding onto the bridle-helmet with one four-fingered hand, Blik poked Alan and pointed.

"Look, Alan, the Star Tower!" cried Blik. "They say humans once lived in the Star Tower."

"Blik, when will you grow up and stop talking to the humans?" chided his father. "I'm going to punish you severely one of these days."

Alan did not answer Blik, for it was forbidden for humans to talk in the Hussir language except in reply to direct questions. But he kept his eager eyes on the Star Tower and watched it loom taller and taller ahead of them, striking into the sky far above the buildings of the city. He quickened his pace, so that he began to pull ahead of Robb, and Robb had to caution him.

Between the Blue Forest and Falklyn, they were still in wild country, where the land was eroded and there were no farms and fields. Little clumps of ttornot trees huddled here and there among the gullies and low hills, thickening back toward the Blue Forest behind them, thinning toward the northwest plain, beyond which lay the distant mountains.

They rounded a curve in the dusty road, and Blik whistled in excitement from Alan's shoulders. A figure stood on a little promontory overhanging the road ahead of them.

At first Alan thought it was a tall, slender Hussir, for a short jacket partly concealed its nakedness. Then he saw it was a young human girl.

No Hussir ever boasted that mop of tawny hair, that tailless posterior curve.

"A Wild Human!" growled Wiln in astonishment Alan shivered. It was rumored the Wild Humans killed Hussirs and ate other humans.

The girl was looking away toward Fafflyn. Wfln unslung his short bow and loosed an arrow at her.

The bolt exploded the dust near her feet With a toss of bright hair, she turned her head and saw them. Thai she was gone like a deer.

When they came up to where she had stood, there was a brightness in the bushes beside the road. It was a pair of the colorful trousers such as Hussirs wore, only trimmer, tangled inextricably in a thorny bush. Evidently the girl had been caught as she climbed up from the road, and had had to crawl out of them.

"They're getting too bold," said Wfln angrily. 'This close to civilization, in broad daylight!"

Alan was astonished when they entered Falldyn. The streets and buildings were of stone. There was little stone on the other side of the Blue Forest, and Wiln Castle was built of polished wooden blocks. The smooth stone of Falklyn's streets was hot under the double sun. It burned Alan's feet, so that he hobbled a little and shook Bilk up. Blik clouted him on the side of the head for it

There were so many strange new things to see in the city that they made Alan dizzy. Some of the buildings were as much as three stories high, and the windows of a few of the biggest were covered, not with wooden shutters, but with a bright, transparent stuff that Wiln told Blik was called "glaz." Robb told Alan in the human language, which the Hussirs did not understand, that it was rumored humans themselves had invented this glaz and given it to (heir masters. Alan wondered how a human could invent anything, penned in open fields.

But it appeared that humans in the city lived closer to their masters. Several times Alan saw them coming out of houses, and a few that he saw were not entirely naked, but wore bright bits of doth at various places on their bodies. Wiln expressed strong disapproval of this practice to Blik.

"Start putting clothing on these humans and they might get the idea they're Hussirs," he said. "If you ask me, that's why city people have more trouble controlling their humans than we do. Spoil the human and you make him savage, I say."

They had several places to go in Falldyn, and for a while Alan feared they would not see the Star Tower at close range. But Blik had never seen

it before, and he begged and whistled until Wiln agreed to ride a few streets out of the way to look at it.

Alan forgot all the other wonders of Falldyn as the great monument towered bigger and bigger, dwarfing the buildings around it, dwarfing the whole city of Falldyn. There was a legend that humans had not only lived in the Star Tower once, but that they had built it and Falldyn had grown up around it when the humans abandoned it. Alan had heard this whispered, but he had been warned not to repeat it, for some Hussirs understood human language and repeating such tales was a good way to get whipped.

The Star Tower was in the center of a big circular park, and the houses around the park looked like dollhouses beneath it. It stretched up into the sky like a pointing finger, its strange dark walls reflecting the dual sunlight dully. Even the flying buttresses at its base carved up above the big trees in the park around it

There was a railing round the park, and quite a few humans were chained or standing loose about it while their riders were looking at the Star Tower, for humans were not allowed inside the park. Blik was all for dismounting and looking at the inside of the tower, but Wiln would not hear of it.

"There'll be plenty of time for that when you're older and can understand some of the things you see," said Wiln.

They moved slowly around the street, outside the rail. In the park, the Hussirs moved in groups, some of them going up or coming down the long ramp that led into the Star Tower. The Hussirs were only about half the size of humans, with big heads and large pointed ears sticking straight out on each side, with thin legs and thick tails that helped to balance them. They wore loose jackets and baggy colored trousers.

As they passed one group of humans standing outside the rafl, Alan heard a familiar bit of verse, sung in an undertone:

"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,
I can reach you, though you're far.
Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm"

Wiln swung Robb around quickly, and laid his keen whip viciously across the singer's shoulders. Slash, slash, and red welts sprang out on the man's back. With a muffled shriek, the man ducked his head and threw up his arms to protect his face.

"Where is your master, human?" demanded Wiln savagely, the whip trembling in his four-fingered hand.

"My master lives in Northwesttown, your greatness," whimpered the human. "I belong to the merchant Senk."

"Where is Northwesttown?"

"It is a section of FaDdyn, sir."

"And you are here at the Star Tower without your master?"

"Yes, sir. I am on free time."

Wiln gave him another lash with the whip.

"You should know humans are not allowed to run loose near the Star Tower," Wfln snapped. "Now go back to your master and tell him to whip you."

The human ran off. Wiln and Blik turned their mounts homeward. When they were beyond the streets and houses of the town and the dust of the roads provided welcome relief to the burning feet of the humans, Blik asked:

"What did you think of the Star Tower, Alan?"

"Why has it no windows?" Alan asked, voicing the thought uppermost in his mind.

It was not, strictly speaking, an answer to Bilk's question, and Alan risked punishment by speaking thus in Hussk. But Wiln had recovered his good humor, with the prospect of getting home in time for supper.

"The windows are in the very top, little human," said Wfln indulgently. "You couldn't see them, because they're inside."

Alan puzzled over this all the way to Wiln Castle. How could windows be inside and none outside? If windows were windows, didn't they always go through both sides of a wall?

When the two suns had set and Alan was bedded down with the other children in a corner of the meadow, the exciting events of the day repeated themselves in his mind like a series of colored pictures. He would have liked to question Robb, but the grown men and older boys were kept in a field well separated from the women and children.

A little distance away the women were singing their babies to sleep with the traditional songs of the humans. Their voices drifted to him on the faint breeze, with the perfume of the fragrant grasses.

"Rock-a-bye, baby, in mother's arm, Nothing's neaby to do baby harm. Sleep and sweet dreams, till both suns arise, Then will be time to open your eyes"

That was a real baby song, the first he ever remembered. They sang others, and one was the song Wfln had interrupted at the Star Tower.

"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,

I can reach you, though you're jar.

Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm thats striped with red,
Feed it to the turtle shell,
Then go to sleep, for all is well"

Half asleep, Alan listened. That song was one of the children's favorites. They called it "The Star Tower Song," though he had never been able to find out why.

It must be a riddle, he thought drowsily. "Shut my mouth and find my head... " Shouldn't it be the other way around "Find my head (first) and shut my mouth... "? Why wasn't it? And those other lines. Alan knew worms, for he had seen many of the creepy, crawly creatures, long things in many bright colors. But what was a turtle?

The refrain of another song reached his ears, and it seemed to the sleepy boy that they were singing it to him.

"Alan saw a little zird,
Its wings were all aglow.
He followed it away one night.
It filled his heart with woe."

Only that wasn't the last line the children themselves sang. Optimistically, they always ended that song. "... To where he Weed to go"

Maybe he was asleep and dreamed it, or maybe he suddenly waked up with the distant music in his ears. Whichever it was, he was lying there, and a zird flew over the high fence and lit in the grass near him. Its luminous scales pulsed in the darkness, faintly lighting the faces of the children huddled asleep around him. It opened its beak and spoke to him in a raucous voice.

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird. "Come with me to freedom, human."

That was all it could say, and it repeated the invitation at least half a dozen times, until it grated on Alan's ears. But Alan knew that, despite the way the children sang the song, it brought only sorrow to a human to heed the call of a zird.

"Go away, zird," he said crossly, and the zird flew over the fence and faded into the darkness.

Sighing, Alan went back to sleep to dream of the Star Tower.

Blik died three years later. The young Hussir's death brought sorrow to Alan's heart, for Blik had been kind to him and their relationship was the close one of well-loved pet and master. The deprivation always would be associated to him with another emotional change in his life, for Blik's death came the day after Wiln caught Alan with the blond girl

down by the stream and transferred him to the field with the older boys and men.

"Switch it, I hope the boy hasn't gotten her with child," grumbled Wfln to his oldest son, Snuk, as they drove Alan to the new meadow. "I hadn't planned to add that girl to the milking herd for another year yet"

"That comes of letting Blifc make a pet out of the human," said Snuk, who was nearly grown now and was being trained in the art of managing Wiln Castle to succeed his father. "It should have been worked while Blik has been sick, instead of allowed to roam idly around among the women and children."

Through the welter of new emotions that confused him, Alan recognized the justice of that remark. It had been pure boredom with the play of the younger children that had turned his interest to more mature experimentation. At that, he realized that only the aloofness he had developed as a result of being Blik's pet had prevented his being taken to the other field at least two years earlier.

He looked back over his shoulder. The tearful girl stood forlornly, watching him go. She waved and called after him.

"Maybe well see each other again at mating time."

He waved back at her, drawing a sharp cut across the shoulders from Snuk's whip. They would not turn him in with the women at mating time for at least another three years, but the girl was almost of mating age. By the time she saw him again, she probably would have forgotten him.

His transfer into adulthood was an immediate ordeal. Wiln and Snuk remained just outside the fence and whistled delightedly at the hazing Alan was given by the men and older boys. The ritual would have been more difficult for him had it not been so long delayed, but he found a place in the scheme of things somewhat high for a newcomer because he was older than most of them and big for his age. Scratched and battered, he gained the necessary initial respect from his new associates by trouncing several boys his own size.

That night, lonely and unhappy, Alan heard the keening of the Hussiis rise from Wfln Castle. The night songs of the men, deeper and lustier than those of the women and children, faded and stopped as the sound of mourning drifted to them on the wind. Alan knew it meant that Blik's long illness was over, that his young master was dead.

He found a secluded corner of the field and cried himself to sleep under the stars. He had loved Blik.

After Blik's death, Alan thought he might be put with the laboring men, to pull the plows and work the crops. He knew he did not have the trying for work in and around the castle itself, and he did not think he would be retained with the riding stock.

But Snuk had different ideas.

"I saw your good qualities as a riding human before Blik ever picked you out for a pet," Snuk told him, laying his pointed ears back viciously. Snuk used the human language, for it was Snuifs theory that one could control humans better when one could listen in on their conversations among themselves. "Blik spoiled all the temper out of you, but Til change that. I may be able to salvage you yet."

It was only a week since Blik's death, and Alan was still sad. Dispiritedly, he co-operated when Snuk put the bridle-helmet and saddle-chair on him, and knelt for Snuk to climb on his back.

When Alan stood up, Snuk jammed spurs savagely into his sides.

Alan leaped three feet into the air with an agonized yell

"Silence, human!" shouted Snuk, beating him over the head with the whip. "I shall teach you to obey. Spurs mean go, like so!"

And he dug the spurs into Alan's ribs again

Alan twisted and turned momentarily, but his common sense saved him. Had he fallen to the ground and rolled, or tried to rub Snuk off against a ttornot tree, it would have meant death for him. There was no appeal from his new master's cruelty.

A third time Snuk applied the spurs and Alan spurted down the tree-lined lane away from the castle at a dead run. Snuk gave him his head and raked his sides brutally. It was only when he slowed to a walk, panting and perspiring, that Snuk pulled on the reins and turned him back toward the castle. Then the Hussir forced him to trot back.

Win was waiting at the corral when they returned.

"Aren't you treating it a little rough, Snuk?" asked the older Hussir, looking the exhausted Alan up and down critically. Blood streamed from Alan's gashed sides.

"Just teaching it right at the outset who is master," replied Snuk casually. With an unnecessarily sharp rap on the head, he sent Alan to his knees and dismounted. "I think this one will make a valuable addition to my stable of riders, but I don't intend to pamper it like Blik."

Wiln flicked his ears.

"Well, you've proved you know how to handle humans by now, and you'll be master of them all in a few years," he said mildly. "Just take your father's advice, and don't break this one's wind."

The next few months were misery to Alan. He had the physical qualities Snuk liked in a mount, and Snuk rode him more frequently than any of his other saddle men.

Snuk liked to ride fast, and he ran Alan unmercifully. They would return at the end of a hot afternoon, Alan bathed in sweat and so tired his limbs trembled uncontrollably.

Besides, Snuk was an uncompromising master with more than a touch of cruelty in his make-up. He would whip Alan savagely for minor inattention, for failure to respond promptly to the reins, for speaking at all in his presence. Alan's back was soon covered with spur scars, and one eye often was half closed from a whip lash across the face.

In desperation, Alan sought the counsel of his old friend, Robb, whom he saw often now that he was in the men's field.

"There's nothing you can do," Robb said. "I just thank the Golden Star that Wiln rides me and I'll be too old for Snuk to ride when Wiln dies. But then Snuk will be master of us all, and I dread that day."

"Couldn't one of us kill Snuk against a tree?" asked Alan. He had thought of doing it himself.

"Never think such a thought," warned Robb quickly. "If that happened, all the riding men would be butchered for meat. The Wiln family has enough money to buy new riding stables in Falklyn if they wish, and no Hussir will put up with a rebellious human."

That night Alan nursed his freshest wounds beside the fence closest to the women's and children's field and gave himself up to nostalgia. He longed for the happy days of his childhood and Blik's kind mastery.

Across the intervening fields, faintly, he heard the soft voices of the women. He could not make out the words, but he remembered them from the tune:

"Star light, star bright, Star that sheds a golden light, I wish I may, I wish I might, Reach you, star that shines at night"

From behind him came the voices of the men, nearer and louder:

"Human, see the little zird,

Its wings are att aglow.

Don't follow it away at night,

For fear of grief and woe."

The children had sung it differently. And there had been a dream... .

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird.

Alan had seen many zirds at night they appeared only at night and had heard their call. It was the only thing they said, always in the human language: "Come with me to freedom, human."

As he had before, he wondered. A zird was only a scalywinged little night creature. How could it speak human words? Where did zirds come from, and where did they go in the daytime? For the first time in his life, he asked the zird a question.

"What and where is freedom, zird?" Alan asked.

"Come with me to freedom, human," repeated the zird. It flapped its wings, rising a few inches above the fence, and settled back on its perch.

"Is that all you can say, zird?" asked Alan irritably. "How can I go with you when I can't fly?"

"Come with me to freedom, human," said the zird.

A great boldness surged in Alan's heart, spurred by the dreary prospect of having to endure Smik's sadism again on the morrow. He looked at the fence.

Alan had never paid much attention to a fence before. Humans did not try to get out of the fenced enclosures, because the story parents told to children who tried it was that strayed humans were always recaptured and butchered for meat

It was the strangest coincidence. It reminded him of that night long ago, the night after he had gone into Falklyn with Blik and first seen the Star Tower. Even as the words of the song died away in the night air, he saw the glow of the zird approaching. It lit on top of the fence and squawked down at him.

The links of the fence were close together, but he could get his fingers and toes through them. Tentatively, he tried it. A mounting excitement taking possession of him, he climbed.

It was ridiculously easy. He was in the next field. There were other fences, of course, but they could be climbed. He could go into the field with the women; his heart beat faster at the thought of the blonde girl or he could even climb his way to the open road to Falklyn.

It was the road he chose, after all. The zird flew ahead of him across each field, lighting to wait for him to climb each fence. He crept along the fence past the crooning women with a muffled sigh, through the field of ripening akko grain, through the waist-high sento plants. At last he climbed the last fence of all.

He was off the Wiln estate. The dust of the road to Falklyn was beneath his feet.

What now? If he went into Falklyn, he would be captured and returned to Wiln Castle. If he went the other way the same thing would happen. Stray humans were spotted easily. Should he turn back now? It would be easy to climb his way back to the men's field and there would

be innumerable nights ahead of him when the women's field would be easily accessible to him.

But there was Snuk to consider.

For the first time since he had climbed out of the men's field, the zird spoke.

"Come with me to freedom, human," it said

It flew down the road, away from Falklyn, and lit in the dust, as though waiting. After a moment's hesitation, Alan followed.

The lights of Wiln Castle loomed up to his left, up the lane of ttornot trees. They fell behind and disappeared over a hill. The zird flew, matching its pace to his slow trot

Alan's resolution began to weaken.

Then a figure loomed up beside him in the gloom, a human hand was laid on his arm and a female voice said:

"I thought we'd never get another from Wiln Castle. Step it up a little, fellow. We've a long way to travel before dawn."

They traveled at a fast trot all that night, the zird leading the way like a giant firefly. By the time dawn grayed the eastern sky, they were in the mountains west of Falklyn, and climbing.

When Alan was first able to make out details of his nocturnal guide, he thought for a minute she was a huge Hussir. She wore the Hussir loose jacket, open at the front, and the baggy trousers. But there was no tail, and there were no pointed ears. She was a girl, his own age.

She was the first human Alan had ever seen fully clothed Alan thought she looked rather ridiculous and, at the same time, he was slightly shocked, as by sacrilege.

They entered a high valley through a narrow pass, and slowed to a walk. For the first time since they left the vicinity of Wiln Castle, they were able to talk in other than short, disconnected phrases.

"Who are you, and where are you taking me?" asked Alan. In the cold light of dawn he was beginning to doubt his impetuosity in fleeing the castle.

"My name is Mara," said the girl. "You've heard of the Wild Humans? I'm one of them, and we live in these mountains,"

The hair prickled on the back of Alan's neck. He stopped in his tracks, and half turned to flee. Mara caught his arm.

"Why do all you slaves believe those fairy tales about cannibalism?" she asked scornfully. The word cannibalism was unfamiliar to Alan. "We aren't going to eat you, boy, we're going to make you free. What's your name?"

"Alan," he answered in a shaky voice, allowing himself to be led onward. "What is this freedom the zird was talking about?"

"You'll find out," she promised. "But the zird doesn't know. Zards are just flying animals. We train them to say that one sentence and lead slaves to us,"

"Why don't you just come in the fields yourselves?" he asked curiously, his fear dissipating. "You could climb the fences easily."

"That's been tried. The silly slaves just raise a clamor when they recognize a stranger. The Hussirs have caught several of us that way."

The two suns rose, first the blue one, the white one only a few minutes later. The mountains around them awoke with light.

In the dawn, he had thought Mara was dark, but her hair was tawny gold in the pearly morning. Her eyes were deep brown, like the fruit of the ttornot tree.

They stopped by a spring that gushed from between huge rocks, and Mara took the opportunity to appraise his slender, well-knit frame.

"You'll do," she said. "I wish afl of them we get were as healthy."

In three weeks, Alan could not have been distinguished from the other Wild Humans outwardly. He was getting used to wearing clothing and, somewhat awkwardly, carried the bow and arrows with which he was armed. He and Mara were ranging several miles from the caves in which the Wild Humans lived

They were hunting animals for food, and Alan licked his lips in anticipation. He liked cooked meat. The Hussirs fed their human herds bean meal and scraps from the kitchens. The only meat he had ever eaten was raw meat from small animals he had been swift enough to catch in the fields.

They came up on a ridge and Mara, ahead of him, stopped. He came up beside her.

Not far below them, a Hussir moved, afoot, carrying a short, heavy bow and a quiver of arrows. The Hussir looked from side to side, as if hunting, but did not catch sight of them.

A quiver of fear ran through Alan. In that instant, he was a disobedient member of the herd, and death awaited him for his escape from the fields.

There was a sharp twang beside him, and the Hussir stumbled and fell, transfixed through the chest with an arrow. Mara calmly lowered her bow, and smiled at the fright in his eyes.

"There's one that won't find Haafin," she said. "Haafin" was what the Wild Humans called their community.

"The there are Hussirs in the mountains?" he quavered.

"A few. Hunters. If we get them before they run across the valley, we're all right Some have seen us and gotten away, though. Haafin has been moved a dozen times in the last century, and we've always lost a lot of people fighting our way out Those little devils attack in force."

"But what's the good of all this, then?" he asked hopelessly. "There aren't more than four or five hundred humans in Haafin. What good is hiding, and running somewhere else when the Hussirs find you, when sooner or later there'll come a time when they'll wipe you out?"

Mara sat down on a rock,

"You learn fast," she remarked. "YouTI probably be surprised to learn that this community has managed to hang on in these mountains for more than a thousand years, but you've still put your finger right on the problem that has faced us for generations."

She hesitated and traced a pattern thoughtfully in the dust with a moccasined foot.

"It's a little early for you to be told, but you might as well start keeping your ears open," she said. "When you've been here a year, you'll be accepted as a member of the community. The way that's done is for you to have an interview with The Refugee, the leader of our people, and he always asks newcomers for their ideas on the solution of that very problem."

"But what will I listen for?" asked Alan anxiously.

"There are two different major ideas on how to solve the problem, and FH let you hear them from the people who believe in them," she said. "Just remember what the problem is: to save ourselves from death and the hundreds of thousands of other humans in the world from slavery, we have to find a way to force the Hussirs to accept humans as equals, not as animals!" Many things about Alan's new life in Haafin were not too different from the existence he had known. He had to do his share of work in the little fields that clung to the edges of the small river in the middle of the valley. He had to help hunt animals for meat, he had to help make tools such as the Hussirs used. He had to fight with his fists, on occasion, to protect his

But this thing the Wild Humans called "freedom" was a strange element that touched everything they were and did. The word meant basically, Alan found, that the Wild Humans did not belong to the Hussirs, but were their own masters. When orders were given, they usually had to be obeyed, but they came from humans, not Hussirs.

There were other differences. There were no formal family relationships, for there were no social traditions behind people who for generations had been nothing more than domestic animals. But the pressure and deprivations of rigidly enforced mating seasons were missing, and some of the older couples were mated permanently.

"Freedom," Alan decided, meant a dignity which made a human the equal of a Hussir.

The anniversary of that night when Alan followed the zird came, and Mara led him early in the morning to the extreme end of the valley. She left him at the mouth of a small cave, from which presently emerged the man of whom Alan had heard much but whom he saw now for the first time.

The Refugee's hair and beard were gray, and his face was lined with years.

"You are Alan, who came to us from Wfln Castle," said the old man.

"That is true, your greatness," replied Alan respectfully.

"Don't call me 'your greatness.' That's slave talk. I am Roand, The Refugee."

"Yes, sir."

"When you leave me today, you will be a member of the community of Haafin, only free human community in the world," said Roand. "You will have a member's rights. No man may take a woman from you without her consent. No one may take from you the food you hunt or grow without your consent. If you are first in an empty cave, no one may move into it with you unless you give permission. That is freedom.

"But, as you were no doubt told long ago, you must offer your best idea on how to make all humans free."

"Sir " began Alan.

"Before you express yourself," interrupted Roand, "I'm going to give you some help. Come into the cave."

Alan followed him inside. By the light of a torch, Roand showed him a series of diagrams drawn on one wall with soft stone, as one would draw things in the dust with a stick.

"These are maps, Alan," said Roand, and he explained to the boy what a map was. At last Alan nodded in comprehension.

"You know by now that there are two ways of thinking about what to do to set all humans free, but you do not entirely understand either of them," said Roand. "These maps show you the first one, which was conceived a hundred and fifty years ago but which our people have not been able to agree to try.

"This map shows how, by a surprise attack, we could take Falklyn, the central city of all this Hussir region, although the Hussirs in Falklyn number almost ten thousand. Holding Falklyn, we could free the nearly forty thousand humans in the city and we would have enough strength then to take the surrounding area and strike at the cities around it, gradually, as these other maps show."

Alan nodded.

"But I like the other way better," Alan said. "There must be a reason why they won't let humans enter the Star Tower."

Roand's toothless smile did not mar the innate dignity of his face.

"You are a mystic, as I am, young Alan," he said. "But the tradition says that for a human to enter the Star Tower is not enough. Let me tell you of the tradition."

"The tradition says that the Star Tower was once the home of all humans. There were only a dozen or so humans then, but they had powers that were great and strange. But when they came out of the Star Tower, the Hussirs were able to enslave them through mere force of numbers."

"Three of those first humans escaped to these mountains and became the first Wild Humans. From them has come the tradition that has passed to their descendants and to the humans who have been rescued from Hussir slavery."

"The tradition says that a human who enters the Star Tower can free all the humans in the world if he takes with him the Sflk and the Song."

Roand reached into a crevice.

"This is the Silk," he said, drawing forth a peach-colored scarf on which something had been painted. Alan recognized it as writing, such as the Hussirs used and were rumored to have been taught by humans. Roand read it to him, reverently.

"REG. B-m CULTURE V. SOS."

"What does it mean?" asked Alan.

"No one knows," said Roand. "It is a great mystery. It may be a magical incantation."

He put the Silk back into the crevice.

"This is the only other writing we have handed down by our forebears," said Roand, and pulled out a fragment of very thin, brittle, yellowish material. To Alan it looked something like thin cloth that had hardened with age, yet it had a different texture. Roand handled it very carefully.

"This was torn and the rest of it lost centuries ago," said Roand, and he read. " 'October 3, 2... ours to be the last... three lost expeditions... too far to keep trying... how we can get

Alan could make no more sense of this than he could of the words of the Silk.

"What is the Song?" asked Alan.

"Every human knows it from childhood," said Roand. "It is the best known of all human songs."

"'Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,'" quoted Alan at once, "'I can reach you, though you're far—'"

"That's right, but there is a second verse that only the Wild Humans know. You must learn it. It goes like this:

"Twinkle, twinkle, little bug,
Long and round, of shiny hue.
In a room marked by a cross,
Sting my arm when I've found you.
Lay me down, in bed so deep,
And then there's naught to do but sleep"

"It doesn't make sense," said Alan. "No more than the first verse — though Mara showed me what a turtle looks like."

"They aren't supposed to make sense until you sing them in the Star Tower," said Roand, "and then only if you have the Silk with you."

Alan cogitated a while. Roand was silent, waiting.

"Some of the people want one human to try to reach the Star Tower and think that will make all humans miraculously free," said Alan at last "The others fhfnlr that is but a child's tale and we must conquer the Hussirs with bows and spears. It seems to me, sir, that one or the other must be tried. I'm sorry that I don't know enough to suggest another course."

Roand's face fell.

"So you will join one side or the other and argue about it for the rest of your life," he said sadly. "And nothing will ever be done, because the people can't agree."

"I don't see why that has to be, sir,"

Roand looked at him with sudden hope.

"What do you mean?"

"Can't you or someone else order them to take one course or another?"

Roand shook his head.

"Here there are rules, but no man tells another what to do," he said. "We are free here."

"Sir, when I was a small child, we played a game called Two Herds," said Alan slowly. "The sides would be divided evenly, each with a tree for a haven. When two of opposite sides met in the field, the one last from his haven captured the other and took him back to join his side."

"I've played that game, many years ago," said Roand "I don't see your point, boy."

"Well, sir, to win, one side had to capture all the people on the other side. But, with so many captures back and forth, sometimes night fell and the game was not ended. So we always played that, then, the side with the most children when the game ended was the winning side."

"Why couldn't it be done that way?"

Comprehension dawned slowly in Roand's face. There was something there, too, of the awe-inspiring revelation that he was present at the birth of a major advance in the science of human government

"Let them count those for each proposal, eh, and agree to abide by the proposal having the majority support?"

"Yes, sir."

Roand grinned his toothless grin.

"You have indeed brought us a new idea, my boy, but you and I will have to surrender our own viewpoint by it, I'm afraid, I keep close count. There are a few more people in Haafin who think we should attack the Hussirs with weapons than believe in the old tradition."

When the armed mob of Wild Humans approached Falklyn in the dusk, Alan wore the Silk around his neck. Roand, one of the oldsters who stayed behind at Haafin, had given it to him.

"When Falklyn is taken, my boy, take the Silk with you into the Star Tower and sing the Song," were Roand's parting words, "There may be something to the old traditions after all."

After much argument among those Wild Humans who had given it thought for years, a military plan had emerged blessed with all the simplicity of a non-military race. They would just march into the city, killing all Hussirs they saw, and stay there, still killing all Hussirs they saw. Their own strength would increase gradually as they freed the city's enslaved humans. No one could put a definite finger on anything wrong with the idea.

Falklyn was built like a wheel. Around the park in which stood the Star Tower, the streets ran in concentric circles. Like spokes of the wheel, other streets struck from the park out to the edge of the city.

Without any sort of formation, the humans entered one of these spoke streets and moved inward, a few adventurous souls breaking away from the main body at each cross street. It was supertime in Falklyn, and few Hussirs were abroad. The humans were jubilant as those who escaped their arrows fled, whistling in fright.

They were about a third of the way to the center of Falklyn when the bells began ringing, first near at hand and then all over the city. Hussirs popped out of doors and onto balconies, and arrows began to sail in among the humans to match their own. The motley army began to break up as its soldiers sought cover. Its progress was slowed, and there was some hand-to-hand fighting.

Alan found himself with Mara, crouching in a doorway. Ahead of them and behind them, Wild Humans scurried from house to house, still moving forward. An occasional Hussir hopped hastily across the street, sometimes making it, sometimes falling from a human arrow.

"This doesn't look so good," said Alan. "Nobody seemed to think of the Hussirs being prepared for an attack, but those bells must have been an alarm system"

"We're still moving ahead," replied Mara confidently.

Alan shook his head

"That may just mean well have more trouble getting out of the city," he said. "The Hussirs outnumber us twenty to one, and they're innig more of us than we're killing of them."

The door beside them opened and a Hussir leaped all the way out before seeing them. Alan dispatched him with a blow from his spear. Mara at his heels, he ran forward to the next doorway. Shouts of humans and whistles and cries of Hussirs echoed back and forth down the street

The fighting humans were perhaps halfway to the Star Tower when from ahead of them came the sound of shouting and chanting. From the dimness it seemed that a solid river of white was pouring toward them, fining the street from wall to wall.

A Wild Human across the street from Alan and Mara shouted in triumph.

"They're humans! The slaves are coming to help us!"

A ragged shout went up from the embattled Wild Humans. But as it died down, they were able to distinguish the words of the chanting and the shouting from that naked mass of humanity.

"KILL the Wild Humans! Kill the Wild Humans! Kill the Wild Humans!"

Remembering his own childhood fear of Wild Humans, Alan suddenly understood. With a confidence fully justified, the Hussirs had turned the humans' own people against them.

The invaders looked at each other in alarm, and drew closer together beneath the protection of overhanging balconies. Hussir arrows whistled near them unheeded.

They could not kill their enslaved brothers, and there was no chance of breaking through that oncoming avalanche of humanity. First by ones and twos, and then in groups, they turned to retreat from the city.

But the way was blocked. Up the street from the direction in which they had come moved orderly ranks of armed Hussirs. Some of the Wild Humans, among them Alan and Mara, ran for the nearest cross streets. Along them, too, approached companies of Hussirs.

The Wild Humans were trapped in the middle of Falldyn.

Terrified, the men and women of Haafin converged and swirled in a helpless knot in the center of the street. Hussir arrows from nearby windows picked them off one by one. The advancing Hussirs in the street were almost within bowshot, and the yelling, unarmed slave humans were even closer.

"Your clothes!" shouted Alan, on an inspiration "Throw away your clothes and weapons! Try to get back to the mountains!"

In almost a single swift shrug, he divested himself of the open jacket and baggy trousers and threw his bow, arrows and spear from him. Only the Silk still fluttered from his neck.

As Mara stood openmouthed beside him, he jerked at her jacket impatiently. Suddenly getting his idea, she stripped quickly. The other Wild Humans began to follow suit.

The arrows of the Hussir squads were beginning to fall among them. Grabbing Mara's hand, Alan plunged headlong toward the avalanche of slave humans.

Slowed as he was by Mara, a dozen other Wild Humans raced ahead of him to break into the wall of humanity. Angry hands clutched at them as they tried to lose themselves among the slaves, and Alan and Mara, clinging to each other, were engulfed in a sudden swirl of shouting confusion.

There were naked, sweating bodies moving on all sides of them. They were buffeted back and forth like chips in the surf. Desperately, they gripped hands and stayed close together.

They were crowded to one side of the street, against the wall. The human tide scraped them along the rough stone and battered them roughly

into a doorway. The door yielded to the tremendous pressure and flew inward. Somehow, only the two of them lost their balance and sprawled on the carpeted floor inside.

A Hussir appeared from an inside door, a barbed spear upraised. "Mercy, your greatness!" cried Alan in the Hussir tongue, groveling.

The Hussir lowered the spear.

"Who is your master, human?" he demanded.

A distant memory thrust itself into Alan's mind, haltingly.

"My master lives in Northwesttown, your greatness."

The spear moved in the Hussir's hand

"This is Northwesttown, human," he said ominously.

"Yes, your greatness," whimpered Alan, and prayed for no more coincidences. "I belong to the merchant, Senk."

The spear point dropped to the floor again.

"I felt sure you were a town human," said the Hussir, his eyes on the scarf around Alan's neck. "I know Senk well. And you, woman, who is your master?"

Alan did not wait to find out whether Mara spoke Hussir.

"She also belongs to my lord Senk, your greatness." Another recollection came to his aid, and he added, "It's mating season, your greatness."

The Hussir gave the peculiar whistle that served for a laugh among his race. He beckoned to them to rise.

"Go out the back door and return to your pen," he said kindly. "You're lucky you weren't separated from each other in that herd."

Gratefully, Alan and Mara slipped out the back door and made their way up a dark alley to a street. He led her to the left.

"We'll have to find a cross street to get out of Falldyn," he said "This is one of the circular streets."

"I hope most of the others escape," she said fervently.

"There's no one left in Haafin but the old people and the small children."

"We'll have to be careful," he said. "They may have guards at the edge of the city. We outtalked that Hussir, but you'd better go ahead of me till we get to the outskirts. It'll look less suspicious if we're not together."

At the cross street, they turned right. Mara moved ahead about thirty feet, and he followed. He watched her slim white figure swaying under the flickering gas lights of FalMyn and suddenly he laughed quietly. The memory of the blonde girl at Wiln Castle had returned to him, and it occurred to him, too, that he had never missed her.

The streets were nearly empty. Once or twice a human crossed ahead of them at a trot, and several times Hussirs passed them. For a while Alan heard shouting and whistling not far away, then these sounds faded.

They had not been walking long when Mara stopped. Alan came up beside her.

"We must have reached the outskirts," she said, waving her hand at the open space ahead of them.

They walked quickly.

But there was something wrong. The cross street just ahead curved too much, and there was the glimmer of lights some distance beyond it.

"We took the wrong turn when we left the alley," said Alan miserably. "Look straight ahead!"

Dimly against the stars loomed the dark bulk of the Star Tower.

The great metal building stretched up into the night sky, losing itself in the blackness. The park around it was unlighted, but they could see the glow of the lamps at the Star Tower's entrance, where the Hussir guards remained on duty. have to tain back," said Alan dully.

She stood close to Alan and looked up at him with large eyes.

"All the way back through the city?" There was a tremor in her voice.

"I'm afraid so." He put his arm around her shoulders and they turned away from the Star Tower. He fumbled at his scarf as they walked slowly back down the street

His scarf! He stopped, halting her with a jerk. The Silk!

He grasped her shoulders with both hands and looked down into her face.

"Mara," he said soberly, "we aren't going back to the mountains. We aren't going back out of the city. We're going into the Star Tower!"

They retraced their steps to the end of the spoke street. They raced across the last and smallest of the circular streets, vaulted the rail, slipped like wraiths into the shadows of the park.

They moved from bush to bush and from tree to tree with the quiet facility of creatures born to nights in the open air. Little knots of guards were scattered all over the park. Probably the guard had been strengthened because of the Wild Human invasion of Falklyn. But the guards all had small, shaded lights, and Hussirs could not see well in the dark. The two humans were able to avoid them easily.

They came up behind the Star Tower and circled it cautiously. At its base, the entrance ramp was twice Alan's height. There were two guards,

talking in low tones under the lamps that hung on each side of the dark, open door to the tower.

"If we could only have brought a bow!" exclaimed Alan in a whisper. "I could handle one of them without a weapon, but not two."

"Couldn't both of us?" she whispered back.

"No! They're little, but they're strong. Much stronger than a woman."

Against the glow of the light, something projected a few inches over the edge of the ramp above them.

"Maybe it's a spear," whispered Alan. "I'll lift you up."

In a moment she was down again, the object in her hands.

"Just an arrow," she muttered in disgust. "What good is it without a bow?"

"It may be enough," he said. "You stay here, and when I get to the foot of the ramp, make a noise to distract them. Then run for it."

He crept on his stomach to the point where the ramp angled to the ground. He looked back. Mara was a lightness against the blackness of the corner.

Mara began banging against the side of the ramp with her fists and chanting in a low tone. Grabbing their bows, both Hussir guards moved quickly to the edge. Alan stood up and ran as fast as he could up the ramp, the arrow in his hand.

Their bows were drawn to shoot down where Mara was, when they felt the vibration of the ramp. They turned quickly.

Their arrows, hurriedly loosed, missed him. He plunged his own arrow through the throat of one and grappled with the other. In a savage burst of strength, he hurled the Hussir over the side to the ground below,

Mara cried out. A patrol of three Hussirs had been too close. She nearly reached the foot of the ramp, when one of them plunged from the darkness and locked his arms around her hips from behind. The other two were hopping up the ramp toward Alan, spears in hand.

Alan snatched up the bow and quiver of the Hussir he had slain. His first arrow took one of the approaching Hussirs, halfway down the ramp. The Hussir that had seized Mara hurled her away from him to the ground and raised his spear for the kill.

Alan's arrow only grazed the creature, but it dropped the spear, and Mara fled up the ramp.

The third Hussir lurched at Alan behind its spear. Alan dodged. The blade missed him, but the haft burned his side, almost knocking him from the ramp. The Hussir recovered like lightning, poised the spear

again. It was too close for Alan to use the bow, and he had no time to pick up a spear.

Mara leaped on the Hussii's back, locking her legs around its body and grappling its spear arm with both her hands. Before it could shake her off, Alan wrested the spear from the Hussir's hand and dispatched it.

The other guards were coming up from all directions. Arrows rang against the sides of the Star Tower as the two humans ducked inside.

There was a light inside the Star Tower, a softer light than the gas lamps but more effective. They were inside a small chamber, from which another door led to the interior of the tower.

The door, swung back against the wall on its hinges, was two feet thick and its diameter was greater than the height of a man. Both of them together were unable to move it.

Arrows were coming through the door. Alan had left the guards' weapons outside. In a moment the Hussirs would gain courage to rush the ramp.

Alan looked around in desperation for a weapon. The metal walls were bare except for some handrails and a panel from which projected three metal sticks. Alan wrenched at one, trying to pull it loose for a club. It pulled down and there was a hissing sound in the room, but it would not come loose. He tried a second, and again it swung down but stayed fast to the wall.

Mara shrieked behind him, and he whirled.

The big door was closing, by itself, slowly, and outside the ramp was raising itself from the ground and sliding into the wall of the Star Tower below them. The few Hussirs who had ventured onto the end of the ramp were falling from it to the ground, like ants.

The door closed with a clang of finality. The hissing in the room went on for a moment, then stopped. It was as still as death in the Star Tower.

They went through the inner door, timidly, holding hands. They were in a curved corridor. The other side of the corridor was a blank wall. They followed the corridor all the way around the Star Tower, back to the door, without finding an entrance through that inner wall.

But there was a ladder that went upward. They climbed it, Alan first, then Mara. They were in another corridor, and another ladder went upward.

Up and up they climbed, past level after level, the blank inner wall gave way to spacious rooms, in which was strange furniture. Some were compartmented, and on the compartment doors for three levels, red crosses were painted.

Both of them were bathed with perspiration when they reached the room with the windows. And here there were no more ladders.

"Mara, we're at the top of the Star Tower!" exclaimed Alan.

The room was domed, and from head level all the dome was windows. But, though the windows faced upward, those around the lower periphery showed the lighted city of FaBdyn spread below them. There was even one of them that showed a section of the park, and the park was right under them, but they knew it was the park because they could see the Hussirs scurrying about in the light of the two gas lamps that still burned beside the closed door of the Star Tower.

All the windows in the upper part of the dome opened on the stars.

The lower part of the walls was covered with strange wheels and metal sticks and diagrams and little shining circles of colored lights.

"We're in the top of the Star Tower!" shouted Alan in a triumphant frenzy, "I have the Silk and I shall sing the Song!"

Alan raised his voice and the words reverberated back at them from the walls of the domed chamber.

"Twinkle, twinkle, golden star,
I can reach you, though you're jar.
Shut my mouth and find my head,
Find a worm that's striped with red,
Feed it to the turtle shell,
Then go to sleep, JOT all is well"
Nothing happened.

Alan sang the second verse, and still nothing happened. "Do you suppose that if we went back out now the Hussirs would let all humans go free?" asked Mara doubtfully.

"That's silly," he said, staring at the window where an increasing number of Hussirs was crowding into the park. "It's a riddle. We have to do what it says."

"But how can we? What does it mean?"

"It has something to do with the Star Tower," he said thoughtfully. "Maybe the 'golden star' means the Star Tower, though I always thought it meant the Golden Star in the southern sky. Anyway, we've reached the Star Tower, and it's silly to tfoylr about reaching a real star.

"Let's take the next line. 'Shut my mouth and find my head.' How can you shut anyone's mouth before you find their head?"

"We had to shut the door to the Star Tower before we could climb to the top," she ventured.

"That's it!" he exclaimed "Now, let's 'find a worm thats striped with red!'"

They looked all over the big room, in and under the strange crooked beds that would tftl forward to make chairs, behind the big, queer-looking objects that stood all over the floor. The bottom part of the walls had drawers and they pulled these out, one by one.

At last Mara dropped a little disc of metal and it popped in half on the floor. A flat spool fell out, and white tape unrolled from it in a tangle.

"Worm!" shouted Alan. "Find one striped with red!"

They popped open disc after metal disc and there it was: a tape crossed diagonally with red stripes. There was lettering on the metal discs and Mara spelled out the letters on this one.

"EMERGENCY. TERRA. AUTOMATIC BLASTDOWN"

Neither of them could figure out what that meant So they looked for the "turtle shell" and of course that would be the transparent dome-shaped object that sat on a pedestal between two erf the chair-beds.

It was an awkward job trying to feed the striped worm to the turtle shell, for the only opening in the turtle shell was under it and to one side. But with Alan lying in one cushioned chair-bed and Mara lying in the other, and the two of them working together, they got the end of the worm into the turtle shell's mouth.

Immediately the turtle shell began eating the striped worm with a clicking chatter that lasted only a moment before it was drowned in a great rumbling roar from far down in the bowels of the Star Tower.

Then the windows that looked down on the park blossomed into flame that was almost too bright for human eyes to bear, and the lights of Falklyn began to fall away in the other windows around the rim of the dome. There was a great pressure that pushed them mightily down into the cushions on which they lay, and forced their senses from them.

Many months later, they would remember the second verse of the song. They would go into one of the chambers marked with a cross, they would sting themselves with the bugs that were hypodermic needles and sink down in the sleep of suspended animation.

But now they lay, naked and unconscious, in the control room of the accelerating starship. In the breeze from the air conditioners, the silken message to Earth fluttered pink against Alan's throat

Loved this book ?
Similar users also downloaded

Roger Kuykendall

We Didn't Do Anything Wrong, Hardly

After all--they only borrowed it a little while, just to fix it--

Roger Kuykendall

All Day September

Some men just haven't got good sense. They just can't seem to learn the most fundamental things. Like when there's no use trying--when it's time to give up because it's hopeless....

David R. Sparks

The Winged Men of Orcon

Far out at the edge of the Universe two scientists play a game of wits--Earth to the winner.

Charles Louis Fontenay

Wind

When you have an engine with no fuel, and fuel without an engine, and a life-and-death deadline to meet, you have a problem indeed. Unless you are a stubborn Dutchman--and Jan Van Artevelde was the stubbornest Dutchman on Venus.

Charles Louis Fontenay

The Gift Bearer

This could well have been Montcalm's greatest opportunity; a chance to bring mankind priceless gifts from worlds beyond. But Montcalm was a solid family man--and what about that nude statue in the park?

Charles Louis Fontenay

Rebels of the Red Planet

Dark Kensington had been dead for twenty-five years. It was a fact; everyone knew it. Then suddenly he reappeared, youthful, brilliant, ready to take over the Phoenix, the rebel group that worked to overthrow the tyranny that gripped the settlers on Mars.

Charles Louis Fontenay

The Jupiter Weapon

He was a living weapon of destruction—immeasurably powerful, utterly invulnerable.

There was only one question: Was he human?

Charles Louis Fontenay

Service with a Smile

Herbert was truly a gentleman robot. The ladies' slightest wish was his command....

Charles Louis Fontenay

Disqualified

If Saranta wished to qualify as one who loved his fellow man, he should have known that often the most secretive things are the most obvious.

Charles Louis Fontenay

Atom Drive

It was a race between the tortoise and the hare. But this hare was using some dirty tricks to make sure the ending would be different....



www.feedbooks.com
Food for the mind