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THE WEAKLING, By Everett B. Cole

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8 **THE WEAKLING**

By

EVERETT B. COLE

*A strong man can, of course, be dangerous,
but he doesn't approach the vicious deadliness
of a weakling—with a weapon!*

Illustrated by van Dongen

NARAN MAKUN looked across the table at the caravan master.

“And you couldn’t find a trace of him?”

“Nothing. Not even a scrap of his cargo or so much as the bones of a long-neck. He just dropped out of sight of his whole train. He went through this big estate, you see. Then he cut back to pick up some of his stops on the northern swing. Well, that was all. He didn’t get to the first one.” The other waved a hand.

“Weird situation, too. Oh, the null was swirling, we know that, and he could have been caught in an arm. It happens, but it isn’t too often that an experienced man like your brother gets in so deep he can’t get out somehow—or at least leave some trace of what happened.” The man picked up his cup, eying it thoughtfully.

“Oh, we’ve all had close ones, sure. We’ve all lost a long-neck or so, now and then. Whenever the null swirls, it can cover big territory in a big hurry and most of that northern swing is null area at one time or another. One of those arms can overrun a train at night and if a man loses his head, he’s in big trouble.” He sipped from his cup.

“Young caravan master got caught that way, just a while back. A friend of mine, Dr. Zalbon, was running the swing after the null retracted. He found what was left.”

“Told me he ran into a herd of carnivores. Fifteen or twenty real big fellows. Jaws as long as a man. He killed them off and then found they’d been feeding on what was left of Dar Konil’s train.”

He shook his head. “It’s not a nice area.”

“Hold everything.” Naran leaned forward. “You said my brother went through this big estate. Anyone see him come out?”

11 Dar Girdek smiled. “Oh, sure. The Master of the Estates, Kio Barra, himself. He saw him to the border and watched him go on his way.”

Naran looked doubtful. “And what kind of a character is this Barra?”

“Oh, him!” Dar Girdek waved a hand. “Nothing there. In the first place, he holds one of the biggest estates in the mountain area. So what would he want to rob a freight caravan for?” He laughed.

“In the second place, the guy’s practically harmless. Oh, sure, he’s got a title. He’s Lord of the Mountain Lake. And he wears a lot of psionic crystalware. But he’s got about enough punch to knock over some varmint—if it’s not too tough. Dar Makun might be your weak brother, but he’d have eaten that guy for breakfast if he’d tried to be rough.”

“Psionic weakling, you mean? But how does he manage to be a master Protector of an Estate?”

Dar Girdek smiled wryly. “Father died. Brother sneaked off somewhere. That left him. Title’s too clear for anyone to try any funny business.”

“I see.” Naran leaned back. “Now, what about this null?”

“Well, of course you know about the time the pseudomen from the Fifth managed to sneak in and lay a mess of their destructors on Carnol?”

“I might. I was one of the guys that saw to it they didn’t get back to celebrate.” Naran closed his eyes for an instant.

“Yeah. Way I heard it, you were the guy that wrapped ’em up. Too bad they didn’t get you on the job sooner. Maybe we wouldn’t have this mess on our hands now.” Dar Girdek shrugged.

“Anyway, they vaporized the city and a lot of area around it. That was bad, but the aftereffect is worse. We’ve got scholars beating their brains cells together, but all they can tell us is that there’s a big area up there just as psionically dead as an experimental chamber.” He grinned.

“I could tell ’em that much myself. It’s a sort of cloud. Goes turbulent, shoots out arms, then folds in again.

“We’d by-pass the whole thing, but it’s right on the main trade route. Only way around it is plenty of days out of the path, clear down around the middle sea and into the lake region. Then you have to go all the way back anyway, if you plan to do any mid-continent trading. And you still take a chance of getting caught in a swirl arm.”

¹²Naran tilted his head. “So? Suppose you do get into a swirl? All you need to do is wait.” He smiled.

“You know. Just sort of ignore it. It’ll go away.”

“Uh huh. Sounds easy enough. It’s about what we do when we have to. But there are things living there. They can be hard to ignore.”

“You mean the carnivores?”

“That’s right. If you meet one of those fellow out in normal territory, he’s no trouble at all. You hit him with a distorter and he flops. Then you figure out whether to reduce

him to slime or leave the carcass for his friends and relations.” He smiled.

“From what your brother said, you wouldn’t need the distorter.”

Naran smiled deprecatingly. “That’s one of the things they pay me for,” he remarked. “We run into some pretty nasty beasties at sea.”

“Yeah. I’ve heard. Big, rough fellows. Our varmints are smaller. But what would you do if you ran into twenty tons or so of pure murder, and you with no more psionic power than some pseudoman?”

Naran looked at him thoughtfully. “I hadn’t thought of that,” he admitted. “I might not like it. Jaws as long as a man, you said?”

The other nodded. “Longer, sometimes. And teeth as long as your hand. One snap and there’s nothing left.

“When they kill a long-neck, they have a good meal and walk away from whatever’s left. But people are something else. They just can’t get enough and they don’t leave any crumbs.” He waved a hand.

“There’ve been several trains caught by those things. A swirl arm comes over at night, you see, and the caravan master loses his head. He can’t think of anything but getting out. Oh, he can yell at his drivers. They’ve got a language, and we all know it. That’s easy. But did you ever try to get a long-neck going without psionic control?”

“I see what you mean. It could be a little rough.”

“Yeah. It could be. Anyway, about this time, everybody’s yelling at everybody else. The long-necks are squealing and bellowing. Drivers are jerking on reins. And a herd of carnivores hears the commotion. So, they drop around to see the fun. See what I mean?”

Naran nodded and Dar Girdek went on.

“Well, that’s about it. Once in a great while, some guy manages to get into a cave and hide out till the null swings away and another caravan comes along. But usually, no one sees anything but a little of the cargo and some remains of long-necks. No one’s ever come up with any part of man or pseudoman. As I said, one snap and there’s nothing left.”

Naran smiled wryly. “Tough to be popular, I guess.” He leaned forward.

“But you’ve been over the trail several times since he disappeared. And you said you’ve seen nothing. No trace of the train. That right?”

The other shook his head. “Not even a cargo sling.”

“You’re making up a train now, aren’t you? I’d like to go along on this ¹³ next trip. Fact is, I’ve been thinking some nasty thoughts. And I’m going to be uneasy till I find out whether I’m right or not.”

Dar Girdek rubbed his chin. “Want to buy in, maybe?”

“No, I don’t think so. I’ll work my way—as your lead driver.”

“Oh, no!” Dar Girdek laughed. “You don’t put a psionic on some long-neck. Lead driver’s pseudoman, just like the rest.” He sobered.

“Oh, sure. You could handle the drivers, but it just isn’t done.”

Naran smiled. “Oh, as far as the other drivers’ll know, I’m just another pseudoman. I’ve been a ship’s non-psi agent, remember? We earn our keep by dealing with the people in non-psi areas.”

“It won’t work.” The caravan master shook his head. “These drivers can get pretty rough with each other. You’d have to set two or three of them back on their heels the first day. It would be either that, or get a lot of bruises and end up as camp flunky.”

“Could be,” Naran told him. “Tell you what. You turn me loose in an experimental chamber so I can’t fudge. Then send your toughest driver in and tell him to kick me out of there. I’ll show him some tricks I learned from the non-psi’s overseas and he’ll be a smarter man when he wakes up.”

Leuwan, Kio Barra, Lord of the Mountain Lake, Master of the Estates Kira Barra, and Protector of the Common Good, stood examining the assortment of crystals in a cabinet. He hesitated over a large, brilliantly gleaming sphere of crystallized carbon, then shook his head. That one would be pretty heavy going, he was sure. The high intensity summary said something about problems of the modern world, so it could be expected to be another of those dull reports on the welfare of the Commonwealth.

Why, he wondered, did some projection maker waste good time and effort by making up things like that? And why did they waste more time and effort by sending them around? When a man wanted to relax, he wanted something to relax with. What he was looking for was something light.

He turned his attention to other crystals, at last selecting a small, blue prism. He held it up, regarding it, then nodded and placed it on the slender black pedestal near his chair, where he could observe without undue effort.

He turned, examining each corner of his empty study, then took his sapphire-tipped golden staff from under his arm, placing it carefully on a rack built into his chair arm, where it would be convenient to his hand should the need arise.

One could never be too careful, he thought. Of course, he could deal with any recalcitrant slave by other means, but the distorter was convenient and could be depended upon to give any degree of pressure desired. And it was a lot less trouble to use than to concentrate on more fatiguing efforts such as neural pressure or selective paralysis.

¹⁴ One must conserve one's powers for times when they might be really needed.

Too, there was the remote possibility that some lackland wanderer might come by and find a flaw in the protection of the Estates—even somehow penetrate to the Residence. Barra shuddered at that thought, then shrugged it off. Kira Barra was well protected, of that he had made sure. Ever vigilant surrogates were deposited in all the strategic spots of the Estates—not only to allow quick observations of the condition of the lands, but also to give automatic warning of the approach of anyone of inimical turn of mind.

He eased his bulk into the chair, twisted about for a few moments as it adjusted to fit his body, then leaned back with a sigh of relaxation and directed his thoughts to the crystal before him.

Under the impulses of his amplified thought, the crystal glowed, appeared to expand, then became a three-dimensional vista.

The high intensity summary and excerpt leader had been not too deceptive, Barra told himself as the story unfolded. It was a well done adventure projection, based on the war with the Fifth planet. Critically, he watched the actions of a scout crew, approving of the author's treatment and selection of material. He, Barra, was something of a connoisseur of these adventure crystals, even though he had never found it necessary to leave the protection of Earth's surface.

He shrugged, taking his attention from the projection.

The lacklanders, he told himself—entertainment people, caravan masters, seafarers, other wanderers of light responsibility—were the natural ones to be selected to go out and deal with remote emergencies.

Like all stable, responsible men of property and worth, he was far too valuable to the Commonwealth to risk himself in wild dashes to the dead, non-psionic lands, or out into the emptiness of space. As far as risking himself on combat missions of interplanetary war— He shook his head. This was pure stupidity.

He frowned uneasily. It had been a bit unfair, though, of the Controllers. They had completely excused him from service on the basis of inaptitude. It had rankled ever since.

Of course he couldn't be expected to dash madly about in some two-man scout. Even as his brother's assistant, he had been a person of quite definite standing and responsibility and such antics would have been beneath his dignity. He had made that quite plain to them.

There had been responsible posts where a man of his quality and standing could have been of positive value. And, as he had pointed out, they could have assigned him to one of those.

But no! They had merely excused him. Inapt!

As far as that went, he told himself angrily, he, Kio Barra, could comport himself with the best if necessity demanded.

¹⁵ Those dashing characters in this projection were, of course, the figments of some unstable dreamer's imagination. But they showed the instability of the usual lackland wanderers. And what could such men do that a solid, responsible man like himself couldn't do better?

He returned to the crystal, then shook his head in disgust. It had become full—flat—meaningless. Besides, he had matters of real import to take care.

He directed his attention to the chair, which obediently swung about until he faced his large view crystal.

“Might as well have a look at the East Shore,” he told himself.

As he focused his attention, the crystal expanded, then became a huge window through which he could see the shores of the inland sea, then the lands to the east of the large island on which he had caused his Residence to be built. He looked approvingly at the rolling, tree-clad hills as the view progressed.

Suddenly, he frowned in annoyance. The great northern null was in turbulence again, thrusting its shapeless arms down toward the borders of Kira Barra. He growled softly.

There, he told himself, was the result of the carelessness of those lackland fools who had been entrusted with the defense of the home planet. Their loose, poorly planned defenses had allowed the pseudomen of the Fifth to dash in and drop their destructors in a good many spots on the surface. And here was one of them.

Here was a huge area which had once been the site of a great city and which had contained the prosperous and productive estates of a Master Protector, now reduced to a mere wasteland into which slaves might escape, to lead a brute-like existence in idleness.

He had lost pseudomen slaves in this very null and he knew he would probably lose more. Despite the vigilance of the surrogates, they kept slipping across the river and disappearing into that swirling nothingness. And now, with that prominence so close—

He had no guards he could trust to go after the fellows, either. Such herd guards as he had would decide to desert their protector and take up the idle life which their fellow pseudomen had adopted. A few of them had gone out and done just that. Their

memories of the protection and privileges granted them were short and undependable. He sighed.

“Ungrateful beasts!”

Some Master Protectors had little trouble along that line. Others had managed to hire the services of halfmen—weak psionics, too weak to govern and yet strong and able enough to be more than mere pseudomen.

These halfmen made superb, loyal guards and overseers—for some—but none had remained at Kira Barra. They had come, to be sure, but they had stayed on for a time, then drifted away.

And, he thought angrily, it was illegal to restrain these halfmen in any ¹⁶way. Some soft-headed fool had granted their kind the rights of Commonwealth citizenship. Halfmen had even managed to take service with the fleet during the war with the Fifth Planet. Some of them had even managed somehow to be of small value—and now many of them held the status of veterans of that victorious war—a status he, one of the great landholders, was denied.

No, he told himself, until such time as the nulls were solved and eliminated, such pseudomen as managed to cross the northeastern river were safe enough in their unknown land. And, he thought sourly, the scholars had made no progress in their studies of the nulls.

Probably they were concerning themselves with studies more likely to give them preferment or more immediate personal gain.

Of course, the wasteland wasn't entirely unknown, not to him, at least. He had viewed the area personally. There were hilltops on the Estates from which ordinary eyesight would penetrate far into the dead area, even though the more powerful and accurate parasight was stopped at its borders. Yes, he had seen the affected area.

He had noted that much of it had regained a measure of fertility. There was life now—some of it his own meat lizards who had wandered across the river and out of his control. And he had even seen some of the escaped pseudomen slinking through the scrub growth and making their crudely primitive camps.

“Savages!” he told himself. “Mere animals. And one can't do a thing about them, so long as they let that dead area persist.”

Eventually, the scholars had reported, the dead areas would diminish and fade from existence. He smiled bitterly. Here was a nice evasion—a neat excuse for avoiding study and possible, dangerous research.

So long as those nulls remained, they would be sources of constant loss of the responsible Master Protectors, and would thus threaten the very foundations of the Commonwealth.

Possibly, he should— He shook his head.

No, he thought, this was impractical. Parasight was worthless beyond the borders of the null. No surrogate could penetrate it and no weapon would operate within it. It would be most unsafe for any true man to enter. There, one would be subject to gross, physical attack and unable to make proper defense against it.

Certainly, the northern null was no place for him to go. Only the pseudomen could possibly tolerate the conditions to be found there, and thus, there they had found haven and were temporarily supreme.

Besides, this matter was the responsibility of the Council of Controllers and the scholars they paid so highly.

He concentrated on the crystal, shifting the view to scan toward the nearest village.

Suddenly, he sat forward in his chair. A herd of saurians was slowly ¹⁷ drifting toward one of the arms the null had thrust out. Shortly, they would have ambled into a stream and beyond, out of all possible control. Perhaps they might wander for years in the wastelands. Perhaps they and their increase might furnish meat for the pseudomen who lurked inside the swirling blankness.

He snarled to himself. No herders were in sight. No guard was in attendance. He would have to attend to this matter himself. He concentrated his attention on the power crystals of a distant surrogate, willing his entire ego into the controls.

At last, the herd leader's head came up. Then the long-neck curved, snaking around until the huge beast stared directly at the heap of rocks which housed the crystals of the surrogate himself. The slow drift of the herd slowed even more, then stopped as the other brutes dimly recognized that something had changed. More of the ridiculously tiny heads swiveled toward the surrogate.

Kio Barra squirmed in his chair. Holding these empty minds was a chore he had always hated.

Certainly, there was less total effort than that required for the control of the more highly organized pseudomen, but the more complex minds reacted with some speed and the effort was soon over. There was a short, sometimes sharp struggle, then surrender.

But this was long-term, dragging toil—a steady pushing at a soggy, unresisting, yet heavy mass. And full concentration was imperative if anything was to be accomplished. The reptilian minds were as unstable as they were empty and would slip away unless firmly held. He stared motionlessly at his crystal, willing the huge reptiles to turn—to waddle back to the safe grasslands of the estate, far from the null.

At last, the herd was again in motion. One by one, the huge brutes swung about and galloped clumsily toward more usual pastures, their long necks swaying loosely with their motion.

Switching from surrogate to surrogate, Barra followed them, urged them, forced them along until they plunged into the wide swamp northeast of Tibara village.

He signed wearily and shifted his viewpoint to a surrogate which overlooked the village itself. What, he wondered, had happened to the herdsmen—and to the guards who should be overseeing the day's work?

Half hidden among ferns and the mastlike stems of trees, the rude huts of Tibara nestled in the forest, blending with their surroundings, until only the knowing observer could identify them by vague form. Barra shifted his viewpoint to the central village surrogate.

There were other open spaces in the village, but this was the largest. Here was the village well, near which a few children played some incomprehensible game. An old man had collected a pile of rock and had started work on the well curb. Now, he sat near his work, leaning against the 18 partly torn down wall. Spots of sunlight, coming through the fronds high above, struck his body, leaving his face in shadow. He dozed in the warmth, occasionally allowing his eyes to half open as he idly regarded the scene before him.

Before some of the huts surrounding the rude plaza, women squatted on the ground, their arms swinging monotonously up and down as they struck their wooden pestles into bowls of grain which they were grinding to make the coarse meal which was their mainstay of diet.

A few men could be seen, scratching at small garden plots or idly repairing tools. Others squatted near their huts, their attention occupied by fishing gear. Still others merely leaned against convenient trees, looking at each other, their mouths moving in the grotesque way of the pseudoman when he could find an excuse to idle away time.

Barra listened to the meaningless chatter of grunts and hisses, then disregarded the sounds. They formed, he had been told, a sort of elementary code of communication. He coughed disparagingly. Only some subhuman could bring himself to study such things.

Of course, he knew that some lacklanders could make vocal converse with the pseudomen and caravan masters seemed to do it as a regular thing, but he could see no point in such effort. He could make his demands known without lowering himself by making idiotic noises.

His communicator crystals would drive simple thoughts into even the thick skulls of his slaves. And he could—and did—thus get obedience and performance from those

slaves by using normal, sensible means as befitted one of the race of true men.

And what would one want of the pseudomen other than obedience? Would one perhaps wish to discuss matters of abstract interest with these beast men? He regarded the scene with growing irritation.

Now, he remembered. It was one of those days of rest which some idiot in the Council had once sponsored. And a group of soft-headed fools had concurred, so that one now had to tolerate periodic days of idleness.

Times had changed, he thought. There had been a time when slaves were slaves and a man could expect to get work from them in return for his protection and support.

But even with these new, soft laws, herds must be guarded—especially with that null expanding as it was. Even some lackland idiot should be able to understand that much.

He turned his attention to the headman's hut.

The man was there. Surrounded by a few villagers, he squatted before his flimsy, frond-roofed hut, his mouth in grotesque motion. Now, he stopped his noisemaking and poised his head. Then he nodded, looking about the village.

Obviously, he was taking his ease and allowing his people to do as they would, without supervision.

Barra started to concentrate on the ¹⁹ surrogate, to make his wishes and his displeasure known. Then he turned impatiently from the crystal, seizing his staff. Efficient as the surrogates were, there were some things better attended to in person.

He got to his feet and strode angrily out of the study, sending a peremptory summons before him. As he entered the wide hallway, an elderly slave came toward him. Barra looked at the man imperiously.

“My cloak,” he demanded, “and the cap of power.”

He projected the image of his fiber cloak and of the heavy gold headpiece with its precisely positioned crystals, being careful to note the red, green and blue glow of the various jewels. Meticulously, he filled in details of the gracefully formed filigree which formed mounts to support the glowing spheres. And he indicated the padded headpiece with its incrustation of crystal carbon, so his servitor could make no mistake. The man was more sensitive than one of the village slaves, but even so, he was merely a pseudoman and had to have things carefully delineated for him.

As the man walked toward a closet, Barra looked after him unhappily. The heavy power and control circlet was unnecessary in the Residence, for amplifiers installed in the building took care of all requirements. But outside, in the village and fields, a

portable source of power and control was indispensable and this heavy gold cap was the best device he had been able to find.

Even so, he hated to wear the circlet. The massive crystals mounted on their supporting points weighed a couple of pounds by themselves and though the gold insulating supports were designed as finely as possible, the metal was still massive and heavy. It was a definite strain on his neck muscles to wear the thing and he always got a headache from it.

For an instant, envy of the powerful psionics crossed his mind. There were, he knew, those who required no control or power devices, being able to govern and direct psionic forces without aid. But his powers, though effective as any, required amplification and when he went out of the Residence it was essential that he have the cap with him.

Proper and forceful handling of the things of the Estates, both animate and inanimate, demanded considerable psionic power and this made the large red power crystal at the center of his cap most necessary.

Besides, simultaneous control problems could be difficult—sometimes even almost impossible—without the co-ordinating crystals which were inset at the periphery of the headband.

And there was the possibility that he might meet some trespassing lacklander who might have to be impressed with the resources of the master of Kira Barra. He knew of more than one instance wherein a Master Protector had been overcome by some predatory lackland wanderer, who had then managed by one means or another to secure his own accession to 20 the estates of his victim. He smiled grimly.

Carelessness could be costly. He had proved that to his brother.

Kio Barra still remembered the first time he had quarreled violently with Boemar. He still remembered the gentle, sympathetic smile and the sudden, twisting agony that had shot through him as his power crystal overloaded. The flare of energy had left him incapable of so much as receiving a strongly driven thought for many days.

He laughed. But, poor, soft fool that he had been, Boemar had carefully nursed his brother's mind back to strength again.

Yes, Boemar had been a powerful man, but a very unwise one. And he had forgotten the one great strength of his weaker brother—a strength that had grown as Leuwan aged. And so, it was Leuwan who was Kio Barra.

Saurian being rescued from the null

But such a thing would never again happen at Kira Barra. With his controls and amplifiers, he was more than a match for the most powerful of the great psionics—so long as they didn't meet him with affectionate sympathy.

He stood silently as the servitor put the cap on his head and placed the cloak about his shoulders. Then, tucking his heavy duty distorter under his arm, he turned toward the outer door. The control jewels on his cap burned with inner fire as he raised himself a few inches from the floor and floated out toward the dock.

Not far from the forest shaded village of Tibara, logs had been lashed together to form a pier which jutted from the shore and provided a mooring for the hollowed logs used by men of the village in harvesting the fish of the lake. Several boats nested here, their bows pointing toward the fender logs of the pier. More were 21 drawn up on the gravel of the shore, where they lay, bottoms upward, that they might dry and be cleaned.

A few villagers squatted by their boats and near the pier. Others were by the nets which had been spread over the gravel to dry.

One large section of the pier was vacant. Always, this area was reserved for the use of the Lord of the Mountain Lake.

As Barra's boat sped through the water, he concentrated his attention on the logs of the pier, urging his boat to increasing speed. The sharp prow rose high in the water, a long vee of foam extending from it, to spread out far behind the racing boat.

As the bow loomed almost over the floating logs, Barra abruptly transferred his focus of attention to his right rear, pulling with all the power of the boat's drive crystals. The craft swung violently, throwing a solid sheet of water over pier and shore, drenching the logs and the men about them.

Then the bow settled and the boat lay dead in the water, less than an inch from the pier's fender logs.

Barra studied the space between boat and logs for an instant, then nodded in satisfaction. It was an adequate landing by anyone's standards.

His tension somewhat relieved, he raised himself from the boat and hovered over the dock.

Sternly, he looked at the villagers who were now on their feet, brushing water from their heads and faces. They ceased their movements, eying him apprehensively and he motioned imperiously toward the boat.

"Secure it!"

The jewels of his control cap glowed briefly, amplifying and radiating the thought.

The villagers winced, then two of them moved to obey the command. Barra turned his attention away and arrowed toward the screen of trees which partially concealed the village proper.

As he dropped to the ground in the clearing before the headman's hut, men and women looked at him, then edged toward their homes. He ignored them, centering his attention on the headman himself.

The man had gotten to his feet and was anxiously studying his master's face.

For a few seconds, Barra examined the man. He was old. He had been headman of the village under the old Master Protector, his father—and his brother had seen no reason for change, allowing the aging headman to remain in charge of the welfare of his people.

But this was in the long ago. Both of the older Kio Barra had been soft, slack men, seeking no more than average results. He, Leuwan, was different—more exacting—more demanding of positive returns from the Estates.

Oh, to be sure, Kira Barra had somehow prospered under the soft hands of his predecessors, despite their coddling of the subhuman pseudomen, but there had been many laxities which had infuriated Leuwan, ²²even when he was a mere youth. He frowned thoughtfully.

Of course, if those two hadn't been so soft and tolerant, he would have been something other than Lord of the Mountain Lake. He would have had to find other activities elsewhere. He dropped the line of thought.

This was not taking care of the situation.

He put his full attention on the man before him, driving a demand with full power of cap amplifier.

“Why are all your people idling away their time? Where are your herdsman and guards?”

The headman's face tensed with effort. He waved a hand southward and made meaningless noises. Faintly, the thought came through to Barra.

“In south forest, with herd. Not idle, is rest day. Few work.”

Barra looked angrily at the man. Did this fool actually think he could evade and lie his way out of the trouble his obvious failure to supervise had brought? He jabbed a thumb northward.

“What about that herd drifting toward the north river?” The two green communicator crystals gleamed with cold fire.

The headman looked confused. “Not north,” came the blurred thought. “No herd north. All south forest, near swamp. One-hand boys watch. Some guard. Is rest day.”

Unbelievably Barra stared at the pseudoman. He was actually persisting in his effort to lie away his failure. Or was he attempting some sort of defiance? Had his father and brother tolerated such things as this, or was this something new, stemming from the man’s age? Or, perhaps, he was trying the temper of the Master Protector, to see how far he could go in encroaching on authority.

He would deal with this—and now!

Abruptly, he turned away, to direct his attention to the central surrogate. It was equipped with a projector crystal.

The air in the clearing glowed and a scene formed in the open space. Unmistakably, it was the northern part of Kira Barra. The lake was shown, and sufficient landmarks to make the location obvious, even to a pseudoman. Carefully, Barra prevented any trace of the blank, swirling null from intruding on the scene. Perhaps the subhuman creature before him knew something of its properties, but there was no point in making these things too obvious.

He focused the scene on the stream and brought the approaching herd into the picture, then he flashed in his own face, watching. And he brought the view down closely enough to indicate that no human creature was near the herd. Finally, he turned his attention to the headman again.

“There was the herd. Where were your people?”

The old man shook his head incredulously, then turned toward one of the few men who still remained in the clearing.

He made a series of noises and the 23 other nodded. There were more of the growls and hisses, then the headman waved a hand southward and the other nodded again and turned away, to run into the trees and disappear.

The headman faced Barra again.

“Send man,” he thought laboriously. “Be sure herd is still south.” He pointed toward the area where the projection had been.

“That not herd,” he thought. “That other herd. Never see before.”

Barra scowled furiously.

“You incapable imbecile! You dare to call your master a liar?”

He swung about, his furious gaze scanning the village. The pile of stones he had noticed before caught his attention. He focused on it.

A few stones rose into the air and flew toward the headman.

The old man faced about, his eyes widening in sudden fear. He dodged one of the flying stones, then turned to flee.

Barra flicked a second control on him briefly and the flight was halted.

More stones flew, making thudding sounds as they struck, then sailing away, to gain velocity before they curved back, to strike again.

At last, Barra turned from the litter of rock about the formless mass on the ground. He stared around the village, the fury slowly ebbing within him.

A few faces could be seen, peeping from windows and from between trees. He motioned.

“All villagers,” he ordered. “Here before me. Now!” He waited impatiently as people reluctantly came from their huts and out of the trees, to approach the clearing.

At last, the villagers were assembled. Barra looked them over, identifying each as he looked at him. Apart from the others, one of the younger herd guards stood close to his woman. Barra looked at him thoughtfully.

This man, he had noted, was obeyed by both herds and herdsmen. He had seen him at work, as he had seen all the villagers, and obviously, the man was capable of quick decisions—as quick, that was, as any pseudoman could be. He pointed.

“This village needs a new headman,” he thought peremptorily. “You will take charge of it.”

The man looked toward the huddled mass in the center of the litter of rocks, then looked back at his woman. A faint wave of reluctance came to Barra, who stared sternly.

“I said you are the new headman,” he thought imperiously. “Take charge.” He waved a hand.

“And get this mess cleaned up. I want a neat village from now on.”

As the man lowered his head submissively, Barra turned away, rose from the ground, and drifted majestically toward the lake shore. He could check on the progress of the village from his view crystal back at the Residence.

The situation had been taken care of and there was no point in remaining in the depressing atmosphere of the village for too long.

Besides, there was that adventure ²⁴projection he hadn't finished. Perhaps it would be of interest now.

As the projection faded, Barra looked around the study, then got out of his chair and picked the crystal from its pedestal. He stood, looking at it approvingly for a few seconds, then went over to the cabinet and set it back in its case. For a time, he looked at the rest of the assortment.

Finally, he shook his head. Some of them, he would sell unscanned. The others—well, they could wait.

Yes, he thought, the record crystals had better be left alone for a while. He hadn't finished his inspection of the Estates and the situation at Tibara might not be an isolated case. It would be well to make a really searching inspection. He sighed.

In fact, it might be well to make frequent searching inspections.

Shortly after his accession to the Estates, he had seen to the defense of Kira Barra. He smiled wryly as he thought of the expense he had incurred in securing all those power and control crystals to make up his surrogate installations. But they had been well worth it.

He had been most thorough then, but that had been some time ago. His last full inspection had been almost a year ago. Lately he had been satisfying himself with spot inspections, not really going over the Estates from border to border.

Of course, the spot inspections had been calculated to touch the potential trouble spots and they had been productive of results, but there might still be hidden things he should know about. This would have to be looked into.

He turned and went back to his chair, causing it to swivel around and face the view crystal.

There was that matter of Tibara, as far as that went. Possibly it would be well to count that herd and identify the animals positively.

Maybe the pasturage was getting poor and he would have to instruct the new headman to move to better lands. Those strays had looked rather thin, now that he thought of it.

Maybe some of the other long-necks had strayed from the main herd and he would have to have the headman send out guards to pick them up and bring them in.

He concentrated on the viewer, swinging its scan over to the swamp where he had driven that small herd.

They were still there, wallowing in the shallow water and grazing on the lush vegetation. He smiled. It would be several days before their feeble minds threw off the

impression he had forced on them that this was their proper feeding place.

Idly, he examined the beasts, then he leaned forward, studying them more critically. They weren't the heavy, fat producers of meat normal to the Tibara herd. Something was wrong.

These were the same general breed as the Tibara long-necks, to be sure, but either their pasturage had been unbelievably bad or they had been recently run—long and hard. They looked almost like draft beasts.

²⁵ He frowned. If these were from the Tibara herd, he'd been missing something for quite a while.

Thoughtfully, he caused the scan to shift. As he followed a small river, he noted groups of the huge, greenish gray beasts as they grazed on the tender rock ferns. Here and there, he noted herdsmen and chore boys either watching or urging the great brutes about with their noisemakers, keeping the herd together. He examined the scene critically, counting and evaluating. Finally, he settled back in his chair.

The herd was all here—even to the chicks. And they were in good shape. He smiled wryly.

Those brutes over in the swamp really didn't belong here, then. They must have drifted into the Estates from the null, and been on their way back. The headman— He shrugged.

"Oh, well," he told himself, "it was time I got a new headman for Tibara, anyway. And the discipline there will be tighter from now on."

He started to shift scan again, then sat up. The view was pulsing.

As he watched, the scan shifted automatically, to pick up the eastern border of the Estates. Stretching across the landscape was a thin line of draft saurians, each with its driver straddling its neck. The train had halted and a heavily armored riding lizard advanced toward the surrogate. Its rider was facing the hidden crystals.

As Barra focused on him, the man nodded.

"Master Protector?"

"That is correct." Barra activated his communicators. "I am Kio Barra, Master of the Estates Kira Barra."

The other smiled. "I am Dar Makun, independent caravan master," he announced. "The null turbulence forced me off route. Lost a few carriers and several days of time. I'd like to request permission to pass over your land. And perhaps you could favor me by

selling some long-necks to fill my train again. The brutes I've got left are a little overloaded."

Barra considered. It was not an unusual request, of course. Certain caravans habitually came through, to do business with the Estates. Others were often detoured by the northern null and forced to come through Kira Barra.

Of course, the masters of the caravans were lacklanders, but they had given little trouble in the past. And this one seemed to be a little above the average if anything. In his own way, he was a man of substance, for an owner master was quite different from someone who merely guided another's train for hire.

The northern null was a menace, Barra thought, but it did have this one advantage. The regular caravans, of course, passed with the courtesy of the Estates, doing business on their way. But these others paid and their pasturage and passage fees added to the income of the Estates.

In this case, the sale of a few draft saurians could be quite profitable. He shifted the view crystals to allow two-way vision.

²⁶ "To be sure." He waved a hand. "Direct your train due west to the second river. Cross that, then follow it southward. I will meet you at the first village you come to and we can kennel your slaves there and put your beasts to pasture under my herdsmen. From there, it is a short distance to the Residence."

"Thank you." Dar Makun nodded again, then turned and waved an arm. Faintly, Barra caught the command to proceed.

He watched for a few minutes and examined the long train as it moved over the rolling land and lumbered into a forest. Then he shifted his scan to continue his inspection of the rest of the lands. It would be several hours before that caravan could reach Tibara and he could scan back and note its progress as he wished.

He relaxed in his chair, watching the panorama as the Estates unrolled before him. Now and then, he halted the steady motion of the scanner, to examine village or herd closely. Then he nodded in satisfaction and continued his inspection.

The Estates, he decided, were in overall good condition. Of course, there were a few corrections he would have to have made in the days to come, but these could be taken care of after the departure of the caravan.

There was that grain field over in the Zadabar section, for example. That headman would have to be straightened out. He smiled grimly. Maybe it would be well to create a vacancy in that village. But that could wait for a few days.

He directed the scan back to the eastern section, tracing the route he had given the caravan master. At last, the long line of saurians came into view and he watched their

deceptively awkward gait as the alien crawled through a forest and came out into deep grass.

They were making far better progress than he had thought they would and he would have to get ready if he planned to be in Tibara when they arrived.

He was more careful of his dress than usual. This time, he decided, he'd want quite a few protective devices. One could never be quite sure of these caravan masters.

Of course, so long as they could plainly see the futility of any treacherous move, they were good company and easy people to deal with, but it would be most unwise to give one of them any opening. It just might be he would be the one who was tired of wandering.

He waited patiently as his slave attached his shield brooches and placed his control cap on his head, then he reached into the casket the man held for him and took out a pair of paralysis rings, slipping one on each of his middle fingers. At last, he dismissed the man.

He floated out of the building and let himself down on the cushions in the rear of his speedboat. Critically, he examined the condition of the craft. His yardboys had cleaned everything up, he noted. The canopy was down, leaving the lines of the boat clean and sharp.

²⁷ He turned his attention to the power crystal and the boat drew out of its shelter, gained speed, and cut through the water to the distant shoreline.

With only part of his mind concentrated on controlling the boat, Barra looked across the lake. It was broad in expanse, dotted with islands, and rich in marine life.

Perhaps he might persuade this Dar Makun to pick up a few loads of dried lake fish, both for his own rations and for sale along the way to his destination. Some of the warehouses, he had noted, were well stocked and he'd have to arrange for some shipments soon.

The boat was nearing Tibara pier. He concentrated on setting it in close to the dock, then made his way to the eastern edge of the village, summoning the headman as he passed through the village center.

His timing had been good. The head of the long train was nearly across the wide grassland. For a moment, the thought crossed his mind that he might go out and meet the caravan master. But he discarded it. It would be somewhat undignified for the master of the estate to serve as a mere caravan guide. He stood, waiting.

He could see Dar Makun sitting between the armor fins of his riding lizard. The reptile was one of the heavily armored breed he had considered raising over in the northwest

sector.

They were, he had been told, normally dryland creatures. Such brutes should thrive over in the flats, where the long-necks did poorly. He would have to consider the acquisition of some breeding stock.

The caravan master drew his mount to a halt and drifted toward the trees. Barra examined the man closely as he approached.

He was a tall, slender man, perfectly at ease in his plain trail clothing. A few control jewels glinted from his fingers and he wore a small shield brooch, but there was no heavy equipment. His distorter staff, Barra noted, was a plain rod, tipped by a small jewel. Serviceable, to be sure, but rather short in range. Barra's lip curled a trifle.

This man was not of really great substance, he decided. He probably had his entire wealth tied up in this one caravan and depended on his fees and on the sale of some few goods of his own to meet expenses.

As Dar Makun dropped to the ground near him, Barra nodded.

"I have instructed my headman to attend to your drivers and beasts," he said. "You have personal baggage?"

The other smiled. "Thank you. I'll have one of the boys bring my pack while the drivers pull up and unload. We can make our stack here, if you don't mind."

As Barra nodded in agreement, Dar Makun turned, waving. He drew a deep breath and shouted loudly, the sounds resembling those which Barra had often heard from his slaves. The Master Protector felt a twinge of disgust.

²⁸Of course, several of the caravan masters who did regular business at Kira Barra shouted at their slaves at times. But somehow, he had never become used to it. He much preferred to do business with those few who handled their pseudomen as they did their draft beasts—quietly, and with the dignity befitting the true race.

He waited till Dar Makun had finished with his growls and hisses. One of the caravan drivers had swung down and was bringing a fiber cloth bundle toward them. Barra looked at it in annoyance.

"This," he asked himself, "is his baggage?" He recovered his poise and turned to Dar Makun.

"He can put it in the boat," he told the man. "I'll have one of my people pick it up for you when we get to the island. Now, if you'll follow me, the pier is over this way." He turned and floated toward the dock.

As they pulled out into the lake, Dar Makun settled himself in the cushions.

“I never realized what a big lake this is,” he remarked. “I’ve always made the northern swing through this part of the continent. Oh, I’ve seen the lake region from the hills, of course, but—” He looked at the water thoughtfully.

“You have quite a lot of fresh-water fish in there?”

Barra nodded. “We get a harvest.”

Dar Makun closed his eyes, then opened them again. “I might deal with you for some of those,” he commented. “People out west seem to like fresh-water stuff.” He looked at Barra closely.

“I’ll have to open my cargo for you,” he went on. “Might be a few items you’d be interested in.”

Barra nodded. “It’s possible,” he said. “I always need something around the place.” He speeded the boat a little.

The boat came to the dock and Barra guided his guest into the Residence and on into the study, where he activated the view crystal.

“There’s still light enough for you to get a look at some of the herds,” he told Dar Makun. “I believe you said you might need some more draft beasts.”

Makun watched as the hills of Kira Barra spread out in the air before him.

“It’s a good way to locate the herds and make a few rough notes,” he admitted. “Of course, I’ll have to get close to the brutes in order to really choose, though.”

“Oh?”

“Fact. You see, these big lizards aren’t all alike. Some of ’em are really good. Some of ’em just don’t handle. A few of ’em just lie down when you drop the first sling on ’em.” Makun nodded toward the projection.

“That big fellow over there, for instance,” he went on. “Of course, he might slim down and make a good carrier. But usually, if they look like a big pile of meat, that’s all they’re good for. A lot of ’em can’t even stand the weight of a man on their necks. Breaks ’em right down.”

²⁹“A good carrier can handle a dozen tons without too much trouble, but some of these things have it tough to handle their own weight on dry land and you have to look ’em over pretty closely to be sure which is which. Can’t really judge by a projection.”

Barra looked at the man with slightly increased respect. At least, he knew something about his business. He shifted the viewer to the swamp.

Of course, he thought, there were draft animals over in the western sector. But this small herd was convenient.

“Well,” he said, “I’ve got this little herd over here. They got away some time ago and lost a lot of weight before I rounded them up again.”

Makun examined the projection with increased interest.

“Yeah,” he remarked. “I’d like to ³⁰get out there in the morning and look those fellows over. I just might get the five I need right out there. Might even pick up a spare or two.”

The swamp was a backwater of the lake, accessible by a narrow channel. Barra slowed the boat, easing it along through the still water. Here, the channel was clear, he knew, and it would soon widen. But there were some gravel bars a little farther along that could be troublesome if one were careless. And his attention was divided. He glanced at his companion.

Makun leaned against the cushions, looking at the thick foliage far overhead. Then he turned his attention to the banks of the channel. A long, greenish shape was sliding out of the water. He pointed.

“Have many of those around here?”

“Those vermin?” Barra looked at the amphibian. “Not too many, but I could do with less of them.”

He picked up his distorter from the rack beside him and pointed it ahead of the boat. The sapphire glowed.

There was a sudden, violent thrashing in the foliage on the bank. The slender creature reared into the air, tooth-studded jaws gaping wide.

It rose above the foliage, emitting a hissing bellow. Then it curled into a ball and hung suspended in the air for an instant before it dropped back into the shrubbery with a wet plop.

Barra put the jewel-tipped rod back in its hanger.

“I don’t like those nuisances,” he explained. “They can kill a slave if he gets careless. And they annoy the stock.” He tilted his head forward.

“There’s the herd,” he went on, “at the other end of this open water. I’ll run up close and you can look them over if you wish.”

Makun looked around, then shrugged. “Not necessary. I’ll go ahead from here. Won’t take me too long.”

He lifted himself into the air and darted toward one of the huge saurians. Barra watched as he slowed and drifted close to the brute’s head, then hovered.

A faint impression of satisfaction radiated from his mind as he drifted along the length of the creature. He went to another, then to another.

At last, he returned to the boat.

“Funny thing,” he commented. “A couple of my own carriers seem to have wandered clear through that null and mixed with your herd.” He smiled.

“Stroke of luck. Too bad the rest didn’t manage to stay with ’em, but you can’t have everything. I’ll pay you trespass fees on those two, of course, then I’d like to bargain with you for about four more to go with ’em. Got them all picked out and I can cut ’em out and drive them over to the train soon’s we settle the arrangements.”

Barra frowned.

“Now, wait a minute,” he protested. “Of course, I’ll bargain with you for any or all of this herd. But I’m in the breeding and raising business, ³¹remember. I certainly can’t give away a couple of perfectly good beasts on someone’s simple say-so. I’d like a little proof that those two belong to your train before I just hand them over.”

“Well, now, if it comes to that, I could prove ownership. Legally, too. After all, I’ve worked those critters quite a while and any competent psionic could—” Makun looked at Barra thoughtfully.

“You know, I’m not just sure I like having my word questioned this way. I’m not sure I like this whole rig-out. Seems to me there’s a little explaining in order about now—and kind of an apology, too. Then maybe we can go ahead and talk business.”

“I don’t see any need for me to explain anything. And I certainly don’t intend to make a apology of any kind. Not to you. I merely made a reasonable request. After all, these brutes are on my land and in my herd. I can find no mark of identification on them, of any kind.” Barra shrugged.

“As a matter of fact, I don’t even know yet which two you are trying to claim. All I ask is indication of which ones you say are yours and some reasonable proof that they actually came from your train. Certainly, a mere claim of recognition is ... well, you’ll have to admit, it’s a little thin.”

Makun looked at him angrily.

“Now, you pay attention to me. And pay attention good. I’m not stupid and I’m not blind. I can see all those jewels you’re loaded down with and I know why you’re wearing them. They tell me a lot about you, you can be sure of that. Don’t think I haven’t noticed that patronizing air of yours, and don’t think I’ve liked it. I haven’t and I don’t.

“I know you’re scared. I know you’re worried to death for fear I’m going to pull something on you. I spotted that the first time I talked to you.” He paused.

“Oh, I’ve been trying to ignore it and be decent, but I’ve had about enough. I’ve been in this caravan business for a long time. I’ve dealt square and I’m used to square dealing. Now, you’ve been putting out a lot of side thoughts about thievery and I don’t appreciate being treated like some sneak thief. I’m not about to get used to the idea, either.

“Now, you’d better get the air cleared around here and then we can talk business. Otherwise, there’s going to be a lot of trouble.”

Barra felt a surge of fury rising above his fear. This lacklander clown actually dared to try to establish domination over a member of the ruling class? He breathed deeply.

“I don’t have—”

“All right, listen to me, you termite. You’ve come way too far out of your hole. Now, you just better crawl back in there fast, before I turn on the lights and burn your hide off.”

The surge of mental power blazing at Barra was almost a physical force. He cringed away from it, his face wrinkling in an agony of fright. Makun looked at him contemptuously.

³²“All right. Now, I’ll tell you—”

Smoothly, Barra’s hand went to the haft of his distorter. The jewel seemed to rise of its own accord as it blazed coldly.

For an infinitesimal time, Makun’s face reflected horrified comprehension before it melted into shapelessness.

Barra put the distorter back in its rack, looking disgustedly at the mess on the cushions. There was nothing for it, he thought. He'd have to destroy those, too. Cleaning was out of the question. He shook his head.

Like all these strong types, this Makun had neglected a simple principle. With fear as his constant companion, Barra had been forced to learn to live with it.

Extreme mental pressure was merely another form of fright. It could paralyze a braver soul—and often did. It merely made Barra miserably uncomfortable without disturbing his control. And the hatred that was always in him was unimpaired—even amplified by the pounding terror.

The more thoroughly Barra was frightened, the more effectively he attacked.

He leaned back in his seat, letting the drumming of his heart subside. Eventually, he would recover enough to guide the boat out of the swamp and back to the Residence.

Tomorrow? Well, he would have to inventory the freight the man had carried. He would have to check those draft beasts. Perhaps he could discern the hidden identification Makun had mentioned.

And he would have to make disposition of some twenty slaves. He summoned up a smile.

Now that he thought of it, this affair could be turned to profit. After all, Dar Makun had been diverted from his route and he had lost some of his train. And caravans had been known to disappear in the vicinity of turbulent nulls.

All he had to do was deny knowledge of the fate of Dar Makun's caravan if there were any inquiry. Oh, certainly, he could tell any inquirer, Dar Makun had arrived. He had stayed overnight and then taken his departure, saying something about cutting around the null and back to his normal, northern swing.

He was feeling better now. He turned his attention to the control crystal and the boat swung about, to make its way back toward the lake.

It took longer than he had thought it would. It was evening of the day after the death of Dar Makun when Barra turned in his seat and raised his hand, then waved it in a wide circle.

A quickly directed thought halted his mount and he looked about once more, at the thick forest.

This clearing was as close to the village of Celdalo as he wanted to come. The villagers never came into this heavy screen of trees, but beyond the forest, there might be some who would watch and wonder. He smiled grimly.

Of course, it didn't make too much difference what slaves might think—if ³³they could think at all, but there was no reason to leave unnecessary traces of the day's work.

He swung about in his cushions and looked back at the line of draft beasts. They were swinging out of line now, to form a semicircle, facing the trees ahead.

He impressed an order on his mount to stand, then lifted himself out of the cushioned seat between the armor fins. For a few seconds, he hovered, looking down at the beast he had been riding.

Yes, he thought, he would do well to raise a few of these creatures. They were tractable and comfortable to ride. A good many caravan masters might be persuaded to get rid of their less comfortable mounts in exchange for one of these, once they had tried a day's march.

One by one, the big saurians came to the forest edge and entered the clearing, then crouched, to let their drivers swing to the ground. Barra looked at the lead driver.

"Make your cargo stack over here," he ordered, "at this side of the clearing. You will wait here for your master."

The man looked confused. A vague, questioning thought came from him. It wasn't really a coherent thought, but just an impression of doubt—uncertainty. Barra frowned impatiently.

It had been much the same when he had ordered this man to load up back at Tibara. Perhaps it was no wonder Dar Makun had been forced to learn vocalization if this was the best slave he could find to develop into his headman.

Carefully, he formed a projection. It showed the carriers gathering in their unloading circles. He made one of the projections turn and drop its head over another's back. The wide mouth opened and stubby, peg teeth gripped the handling loop of a cargo sling. Then the long-neck swiveled back, to repeat the performance.

Barra watched as the man before him nodded in obedient understanding. He shot out a sharp, peremptory order.

"Do it, then! Do it as shown."

The man made noises, then turned, shouting at the other drivers.

Barra watched as the stack of cargo grew. At last, the final sling was positioned and a heavy cloth cover was dropped over the great piles. Barra looked at the headman.

"Bring your drivers close," he ordered. "I have something for them to see."

Again, there was the moment of confusion, but this time the man had gathered the main sense of the command. He turned again, shouting.

The drivers looked at each other questioningly, then moved slowly forward, to form a tight group before Barra, who watched until they were in satisfactory position.

He concentrated on the group for a few seconds, starting the formation of a projection to his left.

As the air glowed and started to show form, the eyes of the drivers swung toward it. Barra smiled tightly and swung his distorter up. The ³⁴ crystal flamed as he swept it across the group of slaves.

He kept the power on, sweeping the distorter back and forth until all that remained was a large pool of slime which thinned, then oozed into the humus. At last, he tucked the rod back under his arm and examined the scene.

There was the pile of goods. There were the carrier beasts. But no man or pseudoman remained of the caravan. His smile broadened.

Once he had sorted this cargo and moved it to the Residence and to various warehouses about the Estates, all traces of Dar Makun and his train would be gone.

To be sure, a few villages would find that their herds had increased, but this was nothing to worry about. He sighed.

It had been a hard day and it would be a hard night's work. He would have to forget his dignity for the time and do real labor. But this was necessity. And there was plenty of profit in it as well.

So far as the rest of the world might know, Dar Makun and his caravan had left Kira Barra to cut back to the northern swing. And the turbulent null had swallowed them without trace.

He turned away. He would have to bring work boats in to the nearby beach. Their surrogates were already attuned and ready, and one of them had been equipped with an auxiliary power crystal. He would need that.

As the boats arrived at village piers, the various headmen would merely follow instructions as given by the boat's surrogates. He would be done with this operation in a few hours.

The days went on, became weeks, then hands of weeks. Little by little, Barra changed his attitude toward caravan masters. Once, he had been cautious about dealing with them, allowing only a chosen few to do business within his borders.

Now, however, he had found a whole, new source of income. And a new sense of power had come to him. Caravans were more than welcome at Kira Barra.

He leaned back on his new chair, enjoying the complete ease with which it instantly shaped to fit his body. It was precisely like hovering a short distance above the floor, yet there was no strain of concentration on some control unit. He allowed himself to relax completely and turned his attention to the viewer crystal.

It was new, too. The old one of his father's which he had brought to the new Residence had seemed quite inadequate when the Residence was redone. This new viewer had been designed for professional use. It was a full two feet in diameter and could fill thousands of cubic feet with solid projection.

Animals, trees, pseudomen, all could be brought before him as though physically present in the study. Too, it was simpler than the old one and much more accurate in its control. He sighed.

³⁵The Estates had prospered. Of course, he had been cautious. Many caravans had come to Kira Barra and left again, their masters highly pleased with the fair dealings of the Estates. Several had returned, time and time again.

There had been others who had come through during times when the null was in turbulence and it was from these that he had taken his harvest. He had been particular in his choices, making careful evaluation before taking any action.

By this time, his operation was faultless—a smooth routine which admitted of no error. He smiled as he remembered his fumbling efforts with the first caravan and his halting improvements when he had dealt with the next. What were those fellows' names?

He shrugged. He could remember that first fellow practically begging him to take action and he could remember his own frightened evaluation of the situation after the first step. He had gone over a whole, long line of alternative choices, rejecting them one by one until the inevitable, ideal method of operation had come out. He smiled.

When he had finally settled on his general method, it had been elegantly simple. But it had been very nearly perfect. Basically, he was still using the same plan.

Now, of course, it was smoother and even more simplified. There were two general routines involved.

Most caravan masters were treated with the greatest of consideration. They were allowed to pass through the Estates with only nominal fees and invited to avail themselves of the courtesy of the Estates at any time in the future. If trades with the Estates were involved, the fees were waived, of course. And many of them had returned, bringing goods and information, as well as taking away the produce of the Estates.

Then, there were those caravans which came during turbulences in the null and which seemed worthwhile to the now practiced eyes of Kio Barra. These were the ones ripe for harvest. Their owners had been offered the courtesy of the Estates—and more.

They had been taken for sightseeing tours—perhaps of the lake—perhaps to see valuable carrier stock which could be had at bargain rates.

Then, in complete privacy, a distorter beam had made neat disposition of them.

Their goods had been distributed through the various warehouses and later disposed of through the safe channels which Barra had carefully cultivated. Their slaves, of course, had been eliminated.

Barra regretted this waste of valuable property, but this way there could be no leak of information and no inquiry could be successful.

There had been an inquiry at one time, but that had been in the earlier days.

The inquirer had gone away with no suspicion in his mind. He had examined the null from the hills and had agreed with Kio Barra that it was ³⁶indeed a menace. He had listened sympathetically to Barra's rueful comments about slaves and stock which had drifted into the null, never to be heard from again.

Barra activated the view crystal. It was time for another inspection of the Estates.

The projection formed and Barra was suddenly in a wood, looking across a wide field. Grain waved in the breeze and here and there, the silhouettes of both long-neck and fin-back could be seen, half hidden by grass and trees.

The scanner progressed, crossing the field and continuing to another forest, operating on the route impressed on it. Barra relaxed as he watched. As the scan progressed through field, swamp and forest, he nodded in satisfaction. The Estates were in far better shape than ever before.

Suddenly, he halted the scan, looking critically at the scene. He was in the central clearing of Tibara. And the village didn't match with the standards he wanted.

He looked critically at the huts. They were becoming run-down. It had been too long since the roof thatches had been replaced. Uprights were bending a little here, a trifle out of plumb there.

There were broken stones again in the well curb and the pile of stone brought for repair wasn't neatly stacked. He frowned.

This was not the first time he'd had to take a firm hand in Tibara. Of course, he had replaced headmen in other villages—more than once in some cases. But Tibara was working on its third headman. There was something really wrong in that village.

To be sure, Tibara was the village where most caravan slaves were quartered. A lodge had been built there for that purpose and it was in frequent use. Naturally, it was

maintained by the villagers. But that was even less excuse for shoddiness. This should be the neatest, best kept village in all Kira Barra. It wasn't.

The frown deepened. This time, Tibara was going to be cleaned up, and he'd keep his attention on it. The village would stay clean if the villagers had to spend every second of their time on it when they weren't taking care of their herds, their boats, and their guest lodge.

And there'd be no slacking in those other areas, either.

He looked around the clearing. There were, he was forced to admit, no idlers about at the moment. The only people he could see were women and children. And the women were busily occupied.

Again, he studied the scene. The men would be coming in from their fields and from the lake in another hour. He would examine a few other villages, then return his attention to Tibara.

Wearily, Retonga, headman of Tibara, pulled himself to a sitting position. He looked over to the other side of the room. Mir was already on her 37 feet. She smiled at him uncertainly.

"It's morning," she said. "Rest day, at last."

"Yes." Retonga closed his eyes for an instant. It had been bad for her, too, he knew. He'd probably been pretty hard to live with these past few days. He sighed.

"Rest day," he mused. "But it means nothing. There's still work. There's always work these days." He got to his feet.

"I wish I were just a herd boy—in some other village." He went to the door and looked out.

Someone had disturbed the pile of building stones. Children had been playing in the clearing the night before and the earth was scuffed up. Bits of wood and cloth lay scattered here and there.

He looked at the houses. Folshan's roof was sagging a trifle, he noticed. And there were a couple of dolls lying outside his door. He shook his head and went out into the clearing.

Old Tamiso was squatting by the well. Retonga walked over to him.

"Your stone pile," he said. "A few of the stones are scattered."

The old man looked over, then shrugged.

“I just picked this one out,” he explained. “When I get it laid, I’ll have to get another. I’ll straighten the pile when I finish here.”

Retonga smiled wearily. “And if the master sees your pile now?”

Tamiso pushed himself to his feet, rubbing his back thoughtfully.

“Yes,” he said. “The master can give great pain, and it seems he is always watching these days.” He walked over to the stones.

For a moment, Retonga watched as he rearranged his pile, then he turned, tilting his head back.

“Awaken,” he shouted. “For the sun looks down and shall he find us asleep?”

A head poked out of a door.

“It’s a rest day. We’ll be at it soon enough, but what’s the hurry?”

Retonga shook his head. “I know it’s rest day. You know it’s rest day. But there’s one who forgets these things. Remember the other evening?”

Folshan winced and Retonga pointed.

“Better get those dolls picked up. And there’s that roof of yours. I’ll give you a hand with it.”

Folshan came out of his hut, then looked back.

“No,” he said slowly. “You’re headman. Remember how that happened? Let the master catch you helping with the work and we’ll need yet another headman.” He shook his head.

“This time, it could be me.” He bent over to pick up the toys his daughter had left.

“Kina,” he called, “tell Chama to keep her toys picked up, or she might be needing a new father.” He turned again.

“I’ll get Kesonta to help with that roof. It’ll be straight in an hour or so.”

Retonga looked after him for a moment, then caught the eyes of a couple of the women. He made a ³⁸sweeping motion toward the earth of the clearing, then walked back to his own door.

He turned, inspecting each detail of the village.

“Let’s see. Is there anything else for the master to find wrong?” Again, he examined each house closely.

At last, he turned away, walking toward a path.

“He’ll probably be looking at the waterfront, too,” he told himself, “and at the lodge.”

He walked slowly along the path, checking the forest floor as he went. As he got to the beach, he looked toward the pier, then winced.

A few hundred yards out in the lake, a high wedge of water was sweeping toward him. At the apex of the vee, he could see the shape of a boat, its bow riding high over the water.

“Oh, no,” he groaned to himself. “Trouble again!” He waited.

As the wave splashed to the pier, he dashed forward to secure the boat. Kio Barra merely glanced at him. Briefly, he caught the impression of a wide field. A line of great beasts were crossing it, their long necks bobbing as they walked. He nodded in understanding.

A caravan was coming in. That would be trouble, of course, but of minor nature. He turned, to follow the glittering figure as it floated toward the path and on, into the village.

As the caravan came to a stop, Naran’s beast bent its knees and 39 crouched. He swung himself to the ground.

He was getting the hang of this, he told himself. At first, he had been forced to fight an almost uncontrollable compulsion to float down normally, but now it seemed quite sensible to grab the heavy fiber strands and swing forward till his feet were solidly on the ground. He spun about.

“All right,” he shouted. “Take your reins. Form your unloading circles on me. We’ll be here for a day or two.”

He watched as the slings were lifted from the brutes’ backs, then turned his attention to the man who was greeting Dar Girdek.

So this was the Lord of the Mountain Lake. He shook his head. The fellow glittered almost from head to foot. Naran examined the jewelry appraisingly. He wore a fourth-order cap. They didn’t make them any heavier than that one. And if there was a device that had been left out, he had never heard of it.

In addition, he could identify three heavy-duty shields, a power levitator, a handful of destructor and paralysis rings, and a projector medallion capable of forming several hundred cubic feet of solid, detailed illusion. He shook his head.

This man must have spent the entire income of his estate for several years in assembling this array. There was enough there to outfit a battle group of competent psionics.

“If this guy needs all that stuff just to get by, he’s as near to psionic zero as you can get,” Naran told himself. “Either that, or he’s loaded with a power compulsion that’s never been equalled.” He frowned.

“Or both,” he added thoughtfully.

He looked again at the blaze of jewelry.

Faintly, he could sense the sour feel of fear. It acted as a carrier for a mixture of hatred, envy, and contemptuous hauteur. Naran whistled softly. There was more, too. He wished he dared try a probe, but with all that arsenal of psionic crystalware, it would be unwise.

“Hit those shields of his and I’d bounce off with a noise like a million bells,” he thought. He turned away.

He’d have to keep his own mind fully hooded around here. He looked back again, glancing at the distorter rod Barra carried. His eyes widened a little.

⁴⁰ “Given adequate drive, that thing would stop a Fifth Planet battleship.” He grinned.

“Arm a couple of hundred men with those things and they could go out and take the Fifth apart, bit by bit. Then we wouldn’t have to worry about those people and their mechanical gadgets.”

He dragged his attention back to the business at hand, tapping in on Dar Girdek’s thoughts.

“... And we can tour the Estates later today,” Barra was saying. “I may be able to show you some worthwhile goods, as well as a few good draft beasts to carry them.”

Naran risked a light probe, taking advantage of Barra’s diverted attention.

He had been right, he thought. It was the “or both.” He shook his head. The guy was almost pathetic. Obviously, he wanted to be the greatest man on the planet. And equally obviously, without his amplifier jewels, he’d be little stronger psionically than one of Dar Girdek’s drivers.

As Dar Girdek followed his host toward the village, Naran turned his attention back to his drivers. He would have to make camp and then get together with that village headman. There’d be plenty of arrangements they would have to make.

He was surprised at the arrangements Retonga had already made. There wasn't much question about it, the entertainment of caravans was familiar business with this headman. He knew all the problems—and their answers.

Of course, Dar Girdek had told him about the hospitality of Kira Barra, but this had to be seen to be believed. He spent his first really restful night in weeks.

The next morning, he walked slowly along the path to the drivers' lodge, paying little attention to his surroundings. Somehow, in spite of the reception given the caravan, he was uneasy.

He recalled his conversation with Retonga the night before.

The man had asked questions about the conditions of the trail. He had been curious about the treatment of the drivers by the master of the train. Then he had shaken his head, looking out over his village.

"It is far different here. This is an estate of death and terror, and our master is the very lord of these. I was a child when his father died, but I think things were different then." He had looked searchingly at Naran.

"I've never mentioned these things before," he went on. "But there's something—" He had looked down at the ground, then up again.

"Our master became Kio through the death of his brother," he went on, "and it was through the deaths of other headmen that I was placed in charge of this village." He had glanced back into the door of his hut.

"I had no part in causing those deaths. The life of a headman here in Tibara is short and none but a fool would fight for this position of mine. It is not a good one. The master's demands are heavy and his hand is even heavier."

⁴¹ This didn't match with the reputation of Kio Barra as a considerate host—a fair man to do business with. It made him wonder.

Had his brother actually ever left this place? But if not, where were his drivers? What had happened to his train of draft brutes? How had the cargo he carried been disposed of?

Oh, of course, he knew there were caravan masters who would accept freight and ask a minimum of questions. Goods could be disposed of. And this was a breeding estate. The slaves? He shook his head. Too simple!

He brought himself back to the present, looking thoughtfully at the drivers' lodge ahead of him. Then he probed gently, trying to establish rapport with Dar Girdek. The man could be in real danger.

He frowned and probed with more force. There was nothing. The frown deepened.

After his talk with Retonga, he had established rapport with the caravan master, but the older man had attached no importance to his suspicions.

“No,” he had thought back, “you are seeing a robber behind every rock now. Kio Barra is a tough master, of course. He’s got a big estate here, and he really keeps it up to the mark. He’s a good host and a really good man to deal with—liberal trader. Remember, I know this guy. I’ve been here before.” There had been the impression of a smile.

“Besides, this guy’s harmless, remember? Sure, he’s a businessman. But if he should try anything violent, I could take care of him without taking time out to think about it.” A final, dismissing thought had come.

“Look, forget about it, will you? If you had to suspect someone of dirty work, pick on some of those northerners. Kio Barra’s too well known for fair dealing. I’ll make a deal with him, then we can go up to the northern swing and really look around to see if we can find any trace of that caravan of your brother’s.”

Naran kicked at the trail. Dar Girdek was a good trader and a successful caravan master. He knew goods and their value, and he was expert in handling beasts and drivers. But he had never been too sensitive. And he’d absolutely refused to wear a probe amplifier.

“Look,” he’d thought disgustedly, “how would you like to do business with some guy that wore a great, big, yellow headlight to tell you he wanted to poke around in your mind?”

Naran put his foot on the lowest rung of the short ladder leading to the lodge door.

Unless he was badly mistaken, he knew now where his brother had gone. And now Dar Girdek had joined him. The details? He shrugged.

They were unimportant. But what was next? What would be the next step in Barra’s plans? And what could be done about this guy? He climbed the ladder and went into the lodge.

⁴² Of course, if the Council found out about this, they could deal with the situation. All they’d need would be a little proof and Kio Barra would be well and promptly taken care of. But how would someone get word out?

The estate was loaded with surrogates, he knew that. A caravan—even a single man—would find it impossible to either enter or leave without the knowledge and consent of the Master Protector. He smiled.

He could just visualize Kio Barra letting anyone out with proof of his activities. The smile faded.

A distant projection? There were those surrogates again. They were broad tuned and he knew it. They’d flare like a field of beacons.

Of course, he could get out a flash appeal and it would be heard. He grinned.

Now, there was a nice way to commit suicide. There'd be no time for help to arrive, he was sure of that. And no shield would stand up under that heavy-duty distorter, even if Barra could only summon a minimum of power to operate it. He shook his head, looking around the room.

Drivers were beginning to stir and get to their feet. Naran looked at the flunky.

"Better get with it, Bintar," he said. "Going to be a bunch of hungry men around you in a couple of minutes."

"Yeah." The man started out the door, yawning. "Got to eat, if we don't do anything else." He climbed down the ladder.

Naran glanced at the drivers.

"Soon's we've eaten," he said, "I'd like to check up on the long-necks. See whether they've wandered during the night. I'd hate to have them get mixed up with the village herd."

A driver looked around at him.

"Aw," he protested, "the master probably pinned 'em down good before he left. Besides, he can identify 'em anyway. They won't go far—not with those herd boys running around."

"Sure," Naran told him. "The master would really like spending half a day cutting out his long-necks from the village herd. And how about that Master Protector? What would he think of our caravan?"

The other looked at him disgustedly. "Aw, who cares about that? Why worry about what one of them witchmen thinks about another? Long's we don't get twisted around, what's the difference?"

Naran growled to himself. He'd blundered on that one. There was no answer to that argument that he could present. He had learned to understand—and in some measure sympathize with—the deep-seated resentment of the non-psi for the psionic. The non-psionics felt they were just as good men as anyone, yet here were these psionics with their incomprehensible powers. And there was nothing to be done about it except obey.

Of course, they didn't like it—or their masters.

⁴³ As far as that went, the caravan herd was unimportant now. The only trouble was Retonga. If the herds were mixed, he would be in real trouble.

“Well,” he said aloud, “I’m not about to get the master to spinning. Long’s we keep him happy, we’ll all be a lot better off. As I said, right after breakfast. I want everyone out on the herd.” He started to turn away.

“Aagh,” growled the other. “Why don’t you face it? You’re just one of those guys likes to toss orders around and make people jump. It’s about time someone showed you a few things.”

Naran turned back. Rosel had been resentful ever since the caravan had formed. He had expected to be lead driver on this trip and he’d made no effort to hide his fury and disappointment at being displaced in favor of a newcomer.

For an instant, Naran considered. There was no point in continuing his masquerade any further. Dar Girdek was gone and he’d have to take the caravan back anyway—if he could work his way out of here, past Barra.

If he couldn’t get out—if he joined his brother and Dar Girdek—it would make no difference what the caravan drivers thought.

He could put this man in his place right now. Then, he could give him the job of lead driver.

But there was something else to think of. If he got the train out of here, he would have to work with this guy. And there would always be an even greater resentment added to the normal fear and hatred of the psionic. That could demoralize the whole train. Naran sighed.

Rosel had put his feelings in the open now and Naran would have to play out the role he had assumed.

He crossed the room to confront Rosel. Abruptly, he thrust a hand out. The other made a grab for it and Naran moved smoothly forward, locking the grasping hand.

Quickly he extended a leg and threw Rosel over it. As the man hit the floor, Naran retained his grip and brought his other hand over, twisting the man’s arm. His foot went out, to smack into the man’s face, pinning him to the floor. Slowly, he put pressure on the prisoned hand.

“Once more,” he said coldly, “I’m going to have everyone out on the herd right after breakfast. Now, do you want to go out and work with ’em, or do I keep winding up on this thing and then have ’em load you up with the rest of the spare gear?”

“Aw, look.” Rosel’s voice was muffled. “Didn’t mean a thing, I was just making a crack.”

“Yeah, sure.” Naran’s voice was scornful. “Just having a little fun before breakfast. Now you listen to me. So long as I’m lead driver, you’re going to do what I say—when

I say it. If you give me any more trouble, I'll pull your head off and make you carry it under one arm. Got it?"

"Ow! Yeah, I got it. You're the lead driver."

Naran released his pressure and stepped back.

⁴⁴ "All right," he said. "Let's forget it. Now, we'll get breakfast over with and then we'll take care of the long-necks. You take the drivers out, Rosel. I'm going to make some arrangements in the village. Be with you later." He swung away.

Barra looked at his reflection with satisfaction. It was too bad, he thought, that he didn't have some companion to appreciate his wealth and power. He examined his equipment carefully.

Everything was clean. Everything was in order. There was no device lacking.

Proudly, he looked down at the huge, yellow pendant he was wearing for the first time. It was funny, he thought, that he had never considered a probe unit before. Now that he thought of it, this was a most satisfactory device. Now, he could look into his villagers' minds and see clearly what lay there. Even, he could get some ideas of the intentions of visiting caravan masters.

Fitting the device and becoming familiar with it had been hard work, of course, but he had mastered it. And today, he could wear the jewel and use it. It would make the day's work easier.

He activated his levitator, floated to his boat, and pulled it away from its shelter, setting the course toward Tibara.

The hard part of this operation was over, he thought. The rest was simple routine.

This caravan master had given him a bit more trouble than some of the others, but his final reaction had been just like all the others. He smiled.

That flash of incredulity, followed by sudden, horrified comprehension, then blankness, was becoming perfectly familiar. In fact, even this was simple routine.

He wondered if he might be able to extend just a little. Perhaps he could operate on a wider scale. There should be some way he could work out to take over a neighboring estate and go from there.

Surely, there must be some outlet for his abilities, beyond mere increase in the wealth of Kira Barra. And there must be some way to gain a companion of sorts. He would have to think that over.

He swung the boat to the pier and floated away, grandly ignoring the pseudomen who hurried to secure his lines.

He examined the village with approval as he stood in the center of the clearing. There had been a great improvement since he had taken that headman in hand. Perhaps this fellow would be satisfactory—might even learn to take some pride in the appearance of his village—if, that is, a pseudoman were capable of pride.

He looked over toward the headman's hut.

The fellow had come out, followed by the lead driver of the caravan. Good, that would save the trouble of hunting the fellow out.

He concentrated on the caravan slave.

⁴⁵“Your master has decided to remain at the Residence for a time,” he thought confidently. “You may have your drivers load up and move to a more permanent location.”

The answering thought was unexpectedly distinct.

“This location looks as though it were designed for a caravan's stay. Where's Dar Girdek?”

Barra looked at the man in surprise. What was this? This fellow didn't think like any pseudoman. Had Dar Girdek somehow managed to persuade a halfman to act as his lead driver? But why?

He drew back a little, tensing. There was something wrong here.

“Now, look,” persisted the man before him. “I'd like to see Dar Girdek. I'd like to know why I haven't been able to get in touch with him this morning.”

Barra blinked, then activated the new probe. He would have to find out what this man knew—how much others might know. Abruptly, he felt a violent return of the fear sickness which had temporarily subsided with the death of Dar Girdek.

The probe was met by an impenetrable barrier. Barra's eyes widened. This man was no halfman, either. He was one of the great psionics. Frantically, Barra's thought retraced the past.

Was this an investigator from the Council? Was he, Kio Barra, suspect? But how had any leak occurred? The fear grew, till he could almost smell the sour stench of it. And with it, came a buoying lift of pure fury.

This man may have unmasked him, to be sure. The Council might even now be sending men to take him, but this spy would never know the results of his work. He would profit nothing here.

He flipped the distorter from under his arm.

As the Master Protector started to raise his distorter, Naran felt a sharp twinge of regret. He had resigned himself to this, and had made his preparations, but he hated to leave Barra to someone else. Of course, the man had no chance now. The disturbance he had keyed himself to make if he were hit with a distorter would be heard by every scholar in Ganiadur, and by half the Council. But—

Suddenly, he felt a sort of pity for the killer before him. The guy wasn't really altogether to blame. He'd been living for all these years with everything against him.

Born into a psionic family, he had been the family skeleton—a thing of disgrace—to be hidden from the rest of the world and given tolerant protection.

And when this barely tolerated being had managed somehow to gain power and get amplifying devices? Well—

The crystal was leveled at him now. He looked at it indifferently, thinking of the man who held it.

“Poor, lonesome weakling!”

Abruptly, the clearing was lit up by a blinding red glare. Naran closed his eyes against the searing light. ⁴⁶ Seconds went by and he opened his eyes again, looking about the village in confusion.

Had he somehow managed to retain full consciousness of ego, even after being reduced by a distorter beam? Was there a release into some other state of being? He had felt no—

He looked at Kio Barra. The man stood, slack-faced, still holding his distorter rod, but gradually allowing it to sag toward the ground. Naran shook his head.

“Now, what goes on?”

He probed at the man's mind.

There was consciousness. The man could think, but the thoughts were dim and blurred, with no trace of psionic carrier. The control and amplifier jewels he wore had lost their inner fire—were merely dull, lifeless reflectors of the sunlight. This man could do no more toward bringing life to the jewels than could the village headman—perhaps, even less.

Naran looked at him in unbelieving confusion, then turned as a sudden, screaming thought struck his mind.

“A stinking, high-nosed witchman! And we thought he was one of us! Ate with him. Argued with him. Even fought with him. I’ve got to get away. Got to!”

There was desperation in the thought. And there were hatred overtones, which blended, then swelled.

As the terrorized ululation went on, Naran swung his head, locating the source. He’d have to do something about that—fast. The fellow would really demoralize the caravan now—even infect the big saurians—cause a stampede.

This guy had some power of projection and his terror was intensifying it till anyone could receive the disturbing impulses, even though complete understanding might be lacking.

Naran lifted himself from the ground, arrowing rapidly toward the caravan, his mind already forming the thoughts which he hoped would soothe the frantic fear and—at least to some degree—allay the frenzy of hatred that swelled and became stronger and stronger.

Barra could wait.

As Barra swung his distorter to bear, he concentrated on the violent pulse needed to trigger the jewel, his mind closed to all else. He turned his attention on his target.

Suddenly, he recognized the curiously tender expression which had formed on the face of the man before him.

Frantically, he tried to revise his thoughts—to recall the blaze of energy he had concentrated to build up.

It was too late.

With a sense of despair, he recognized the sudden, lifting, twisting agony that accompanied the flare of the overloaded power crystal. For an eternal instant, his universe was a blinding, screaming, red nightmare.

The flare died and he watched dully as the unharmed man before him looked about unbelievably, then ⁴⁷looked back to carefully examine him.

“Oh,” he told himself dully. “I suppose they’ll take care of me, but what of it? They’ll put me somewhere. I’ll lose everything. It’ll be just like the place Boemar thought of sending me, when I—”

Furiously, he tried to summon some tiny bit of energy to activate the distorter.

Nothing happened.

The man whose pity had destroyed him suddenly frowned, then turned and darted away. Dully, Barra watched him, then he turned, to look around the village. His face contorted in new terror.

Some of the village men were moving toward him, curious expressions on their faces. He backed away from them and turned.

A few more had moved to block his path.

They were grunting and hissing to each other. Barra looked from face to face, then looked over toward the well.

There were men over there, too, by the pile of stones. The old man who worked on the retaining walls of the village had picked up some of his building material.

He stood, eying Barra calculatingly, a stone poised in each hand.

THE END

Transcriber's note:

Minor typographical corrections are documented in the source code.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE WEAKLING

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