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Way of the Gods
A Fantastic Novel
By HENRY KUTTNER

QUEST TO CENTAURUS
By GEORGE O. SMITH

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Title: Way of the Gods

Date of first publication: 1947

Author: Henry Kuttner (1914-1958)

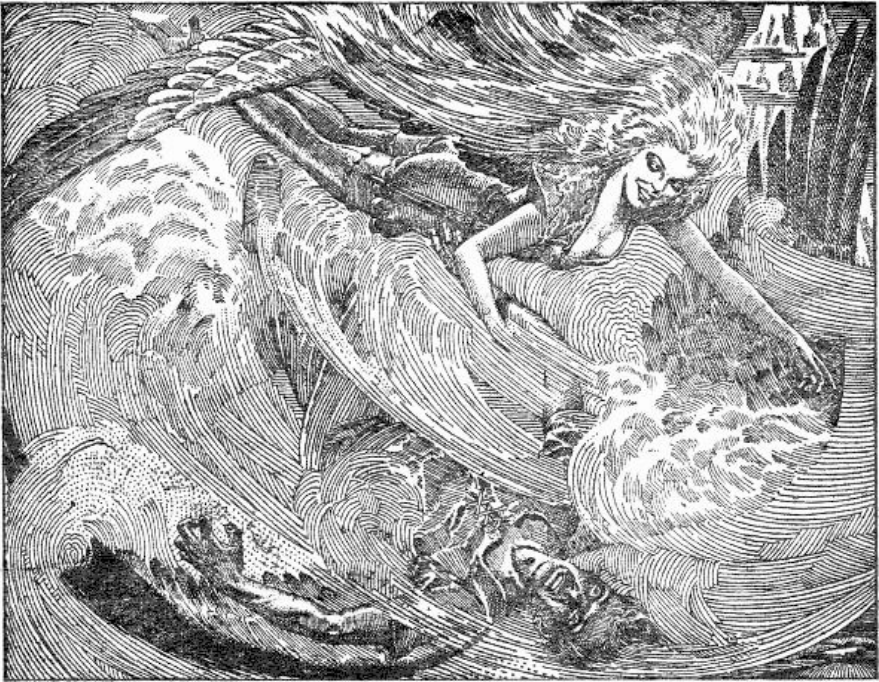
Date first posted: June 12, 2022

Date last updated: June 12, 2022

Faded Page eBook #20220622

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Together they glided across the rushing air currents (Chap. II)

WAY OF THE GODS

By
HENRY KUTTNER

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, April 1947.

Spawn of atomic fission, this strange company of mutants exiled by humanity battles against enslavement in a foreign world dominated by the evil Spirit of the Crystal Mountain!

CHAPTER I

New Worlds

He looked at the October morning all about him as if he had never seen October before. That was not true, of course. But he knew that he would never see it again. Unless they had mornings, and Octobers—where he was going. It did not seem likely, though the old man had talked a great deal about key-patterns and the selectivity of the machine, and the multiple universes spinning like motes in a snowstorm through infinity.

“But I’m human!” he said aloud, sitting cross-legged on the warm brown earth and feeling the breeze which gave the lie instantly to his thought. He felt the gentle pull at his shoulder-blades which meant that his wings were fluttered a little by the breeze, and instinctively he flexed the heavy bands of muscle across his chest to control the wing-surfaces.

He was not human. That was the trouble. And this world, this bright October world that stretched to the horizon around him was made to shelter the race that had become dominant, and was jealous of its dominion. Humanity, that had no place for strangers among its ranks.

The others did not seem to care very much. They had been reared in the creche almost from birth, under a special regime that isolated them from the humans. The old man had been responsible for that. He had built the huge house on the hillside, swooping curves of warmly-colored plastic that blended into the brown and green of the land—an asylum that had finally failed. The walls were breached.

“Kern,” someone behind him said.

The winged man turned his head, glancing up past the dark curve of his wings. A girl came toward him down the slope from the house. Her name was Kua. Her parents had been Polynesian, and she had the height and the lithe grace of her Oceanic race, and the shining dark hair, the warm, honey-colored skin. But she wore opaque dark glasses, and across her forehead a band of dark plastic that looked opaque too, and was not. Beneath, her face was lovely, the red mouth generously curved, the features softly rounded like the features of all her race.

She was not human either.

“It’s no use worrying, Kern,” she said, smiling down at him. “It’ll work out all right. You’ll see.”

“All right!” Kern snorted scornfully. “You think so, do you?”

Kua glanced instinctively around the hillside, making sure they were alone. Then she put both hands to her face and slipped off the glasses and the dark band from her forehead. Kern, meeting the gaze of her bright blue eye, was conscious again of the little shock he always felt when he looked into her uncovered face.

For Kua was a cyclops. She had one eye centered in her forehead. And she was—when the mind could accept her as she was, not as she should be—a beautiful woman in spite of it. That blue brilliance in the dusky face had a depth and luster beyond the eyes of humans. Heavy lashes ringed it, and the gaze could sink fathom upon fathom in her eye and never plumb its depths.

Kua’s eye was a perfect lens. Whatever lens can do, her eye could do. No one could be sure just what miraculous mechanisms existed beyond the blue surface, but she could see to a

distance almost beyond the range of the ordinary telescope and she could focus down upon the microscopic. And there may have been other things the single eye could do. One did not question one's companions too closely in this house of the mutations.

"You've been with us two years, Kern," she was saying now. "Only two years. You don't know yet how strong we are, or how much we can accomplish among us. Bruce Hallam knows what he's doing, Kern. He never works on theories. Or if he does, the theories become truth. He has a mind like that. You don't know us, Kern!"

"You can't fight a whole world."

"No. But we can leave it." She smiled, and he knew she saw nothing of the golden morning all around them. She knew nothing, really, of the cities that dotted the world of 1980, or the lives that were so irrevocably alien to her. They should have been alien to Kern too, but not until he was eighteen had the wings begun to grow upon his shoulders.

"I don't know, Kua," he said. "I'm not sure I want to. I had a father and a mother—brothers—friends."

"Your parents are your greatest enemies," she told him flatly. "They gave you life."

He looked away from the penetrating stare of that great blue single eye and past her at the big plastic house. That had been asylum, after the massacre of 1967—asylum against the hordes bent on extirpating the freakish monsters created by atomic radiation. He could not remember, of course, but he had read about it, never guessing then that such a thing would ever apply to him. The old man had told him the story.

First had come the atomic war, brief, terrible, letting loose nameless radiations upon the world. And then had followed the wave upon wave of freak births among those exposed to it. Genes and chromosomes altered beyond comprehension. Monstrous things were born of human parents.

One in ten, perhaps, had been a successful mutation. And even those were dangerous to homo sapiens.



“Better to die that way than this,” said Elja. “All right, Kern, we’ll go.” (Chap. VI)

Evolution is like a roulette wheel. The conditions of the earth favor certain types of mutation capable of survival. But atomic energies had upset the balance, and mutations spawned in sheer madness began to spread. Not many, of course. Not many were viable. But two-headed things were born—and lived—along with geniuses and madmen. World Council

had studied the biological and social problem for a long time before it recommended euthanasia. Man's evolution had been planned and charted. It must not be allowed to swerve from the track, or chaos would be let loose.

Geniuses, mutant humans with abnormally high I.Q.'s, were allowed to survive. Of the others, none lived after they had been detected. Sometimes they were difficult to detect. By 1968 only the true-line mutations, faithful to the human biological norm, were alive—with certain exceptions.

Such as the old man's son, Sam Brewster. He was a freak, with a certain—talent. A superhuman talent. The old man had disobeyed the Government law, for he had not sent the infant to the labs for checking and testing—and annihilation. Instead, he had built this great house, and the boy had never gone far beyond its grounds.

Gradually then, partly to provide the youth with companionship, partly out of compassion, the father had begun to gather others together. Secretly, a mutant infant here, a mutant child there, he brought them in, until he had a family of freaks in the big plastic house. He had not taken them haphazardly. Some would not have been safe to live with. Some were better dead from the start. But those with something to offer beyond their freakishness, he found and sheltered.

It was the bringing in of Kern that gave the secret away. The boy had gone too long among ordinary humans, while his wings grew. He was eighteen, and his pinions had a six-foot spread, when old Mr. Brewster found him. His family had tried to keep him hidden, but the news was leaking out already when he left for the Brewster asylum, and in the years since it had spread until the authorities at last issued their ultimatum.

"It was my fault," Kern said bitterly. "If it hadn't been for me, you'd never have been molested."

"No." Kua's deep, luminous eye fixed his. "Sooner or later you know they'd have found us. Better let it happen now, while we're all still young and adaptable. We can go and enjoy going, now." Her voice shook a little with deep excitement. "Think of it, Kern! New worlds! Places beyond the earth, where there could be people like us!"

"But Kua, I'm human! I feel human. I don't want to leave. This is where I belong!"

"You say that because you grew up among normal people. Kern, you've got to face it. Tire only place for any of us is—somewhere away."

"I know." He grinned wryly. "But I don't have to like it. Well—we'd better go back. They'll have the ultimatum by now, I suppose. May as well hear it. I know what the answer is. Don't you?"

She nodded, watching his involuntary glance around the empty blue sky, the warm October hills. A world for humans. But for humans alone. . . .

Back in the Brewster plastic asylum, the inmates had assembled.

"There isn't much time," old Mr. Brewster said. "They're on their way here now, to take you all back for euthanasia."

Sam Brewster laughed harshly.

"We could show 'em a few tricks."

"No. You can't fight the whole world. You could kill many of them, but it wouldn't do any good. Bruce's machine is the only hope for you all." His voice broke a little. "It's going to be a lonely world for me, children, after you've gone."

They looked at him uncomfortably, this strange, unrelated family of freak mutations, scarcely more than the children he had called them, but matured beyond their years by their strange rearing.

“There are worlds beyond counting, as you know,” Bruce said precisely. “Infinite numbers—worlds where we might not be freaks at all. Somewhere among them there must be places where each of our mutations is a norm. I’ve set the machine to the aggregate pattern of us all and it’ll find our equivalents—something to suit one of us at least. And the others can go on looking. I can build the machine in duplicate on any world, anywhere, where I can live at all.” He smiled, and his strange light eyes glowed.

It was curious, Kern thought, how frequently in mutations the eyes were the giveaway. Kua, of course. And Sam Brewster with his terrible veiled glance protected by its secondary lid which drew back only in anger. And Bruce Hallam, whose strangeness was not visible but existed only in the amazing intricacies of his brain, looked upon the alien world with eyes that mirrored the mysteries behind them.

Bruce knew machinery—call it machinery for lack of a more comprehensive word—with a knowledge that was beyond learning. He could produce miracles with any set of devices his fingers could contrive. He seemed to sense by sheer instinct the courses of infinite power, and harness them with the simplest ease, the simplest mechanics.

There was a steel cubicle in the corner of the room with a round steel door which had taken Bruce a week to set up. Over it a panel burned with changing light, flickering through the spectrum and halting now and then upon clear red. When it was red, then the—the world—upon which the steel door opened was a world suitable for the little family of mutations to enter. The red light meant it could support human life, that it paralleled roughly the world they already knew, and that something in its essential pattern duplicated the pattern of at least one of the mutant group.

Kern was dizzy when he thought of the sweep of universes past that door, world whirling upon world where no human life could dwell, worlds of gas and flame, worlds of ice and rock. And, one in a countless number, a world of sun and water like their own. . . .

It was incredible. But so were the wings at his own back, so was Kua’s cyclopean eye, and Sam Brewster’s veiled gaze, and so was the brain in Bruce Hallam’s skull, which had built a bridge for them all.

He glanced around the group. Sitting back against the wall, in shadow, Byrna, the last of the mutant family, lifted her gray gaze to his. Compassion touched him as always when he met her eyes.

Byrna was physically the most abnormal of them all, in her sheer smallness. She came scarcely to Kern’s elbow when she was standing. She was proportioned perfectly in the scale of her size, delicate, fragile as something of glass. But she was not beautiful to look at. There was a wrongness about her features that made them pathetically ugly, and the sadness in her gray eyes seemed to mirror the sadness of all misfit things.

Byrna’s voice had magic in it, and so did her brain. Wisdom came as simply to her as knowledge came to Bruce Hallam, but she had infinitely more warmth than he. Bruce, Kern sometimes thought, would dismember a human as dispassionately as he would cut wire in two if he needed the material for an experiment. Bruce looked the most normal of them all, but he would not have passed the questioning of the most superficial mental examination.

Now his voice was impatient. “What are we waiting for? Everything’s ready.”

“Yes, you must go quickly,” the old man said. “Look—the light’s coming toward red now, isn’t it?”

The panel above the steel door was orange. As they watched it shifted and grew ruddier. Bruce went silently forward and laid his hand on the lever that opened the panel. When the light was pure red he pushed the steel bar down.

In half-darkness beyond the opening a gust of luminous atoms blew across a craggy horizon. Against it there was a suggestion of towers and arches and columns, and lights that might have been aircraft swung in steady orbits above.

No one spoke. After a moment Bruce closed the door again, grimacing. The light above it hovered toward a reddish purple and then turned blue.

“Not that world,” Bruce said. “We’ll try again.”

In the shadow Byrna murmured:

“It doesn’t matter—any world will be the same for us.” Her voice was pure music.

“Listen! Do you hear planes?” the old man said. “It’s time, children. You must go.”

There was silence. Every eye watched the lighted panel. Colors hovered there to and fro through the spectrum. A faint ruddiness began to glow again.

“This time we’ll take it if it looks all right,” Bruce said, and laid his hand again upon the lever.

The light turned red. Soundlessly the round door swung open.

Sunlight came through, low green hills, and the clustered roofs of a town were visible a little distance away in a valley.

Without a word or a backward glance Bruce stepped through the door. One by one the others moved after him, Kern last. Kern’s lips were pressed together and he did not glance behind him. He could have seen the hills of earth beyond the windows, and the blue October sky. He would not look at them. He shrugged his wings together and stooped to enter the gateway of the new world.

Behind them the old man watched in silence, seeing the work of his lifetime ending before his eyes. The gulf between them was too broad for leaping. He was human and they were not. Across a vast distance, vaster than the gulf between worlds, he saw the family of the mutations step over their threshold and vanish forever.

He closed the door after them. The red light faded above it. He turned toward his own door where the knocking of World Council’s police had already begun to summon him to his accounting.

CHAPTER II

His Own Kind

Above them, the sky was blue. The five aliens who were alien to all worlds alike stood together on a hilltop looking down.

"It's beautiful," Kua said. "I'm glad we chose this one. But I wonder what the next one would have been like if we could have waited."

"It will be the same no matter where we go," Byrna's infinitely sweet voice murmured.

"Look at the horizon," Bruce said. "What is it?"

They saw then the first thing that marked this world alien to earth. For the most part it might have been any hilly wooded land they knew from the old place; even the roofs of the village looked spuriously familiar. But the horizon was curiously misted, and before them, far off, rose—something—to an impossible height halfway up the zenith.

"A mountain?" Kern asked doubtfully. "It's too high, isn't it?"

"A glass mountain," Kua said. "Yes, it is glass—or plastic? I can't be sure."

She had uncovered her single eye and the shining pupil was contracted as she gazed over impossible distances at the equally impossible bulk of that thing on the horizon. It rose in a vast sweep of opalescent color, like a translucent thundercloud hanging over the whole land. Knowing it for a mountain, the mind felt vertiginous at the thought of such tremendous bulk towering overhead.

"It looks clear," Kua said. "All the way through. I can't tell what's beyond it. Just an enormous mountain made out of—of plastic? I wonder."

Kern was aware of a tugging at his wing-surfaces, and glanced around in quick recognition of the strengthening breeze. He was the first to notice it.

"It's beginning to blow. And listen—do you hear?"

It grew louder as they stood there, a shrill, strengthening whine in the air coming from the direction of the cloudlike mountain. A whine that grew so rapidly they had scarcely recognized it as noise before it was deafening all about them, and the wind was like a sudden hurricane.

That passed in a gust, noise and wind alike, leaving them breathless and staring at one another in dismay.

"Look, over there, quick!" Kua said, "Another one's coming!"

Far off, but moving toward them with appalling speed, came a monstrous spinning tower of—light? Smoke? They could not be sure.

It whirled like a waterspout in a typhoon, vast, bending majestically and righting itself again, and the air spun with it, and the wild, shrill screaming began again.

The vortex of brilliance passed them far to the left, catching them in its shrieking hurricane of riven air and then releasing them again into shaken silence. But there was another one on its way before they had caught their breath again, a whirling, bowing tower that spun screeching off toward the right. And after it another, and close behind that, a fourth.

The noise and the violence of the wind stunned Kern so that he had no idea what was happening to the others on the hilltop. He was susceptible because of his wings. The hurricane caught him up and whirled him sideward down the slope—shrieking in his ears with a noise so great it was almost silence, beyond the range of sound.

Stunned, he struggled for balance, leaning against the rushing wall of air as solid as a wall of stone. For a moment or two he kept the ground underfoot. Then his wings betrayed him and, in spite of himself, he felt the six-foot pinions blown wide and the muscles ached across his chest with the violence of the wind striking their spread surfaces.

The horizon tilted familiarly as he swooped in a banking curve. The glass mountain for a moment hung overhead and he looked straight down at the wooded hills, seeing tiny blowing figures reeling across the slopes in the grip of the hurricane winds. Hanging here far above the treetops, he could see that the monsters of whirling light were coming thicker and faster across the hilltops, striding like giants, trailing vortices of wind and sound in their wake. For an instant he swung in the grip of the hurricane, watching the vast whirling spindles moving and bowing majestically across the face of the new earth.

Then the vortex caught him again and he was spun blindly into the heart of the whirlwind, deafened with its terrible screaming uproar, wrenched this way and that upon aching wings, too dizzy for fear or thought. Time ceased. Half senseless, he was whirled to and fro upon the irresistible winds. He closed his eyes against flying dust, locked his hands over his ears to shut out the deafening shrill of the blast and let the hurricane do with him as it would.

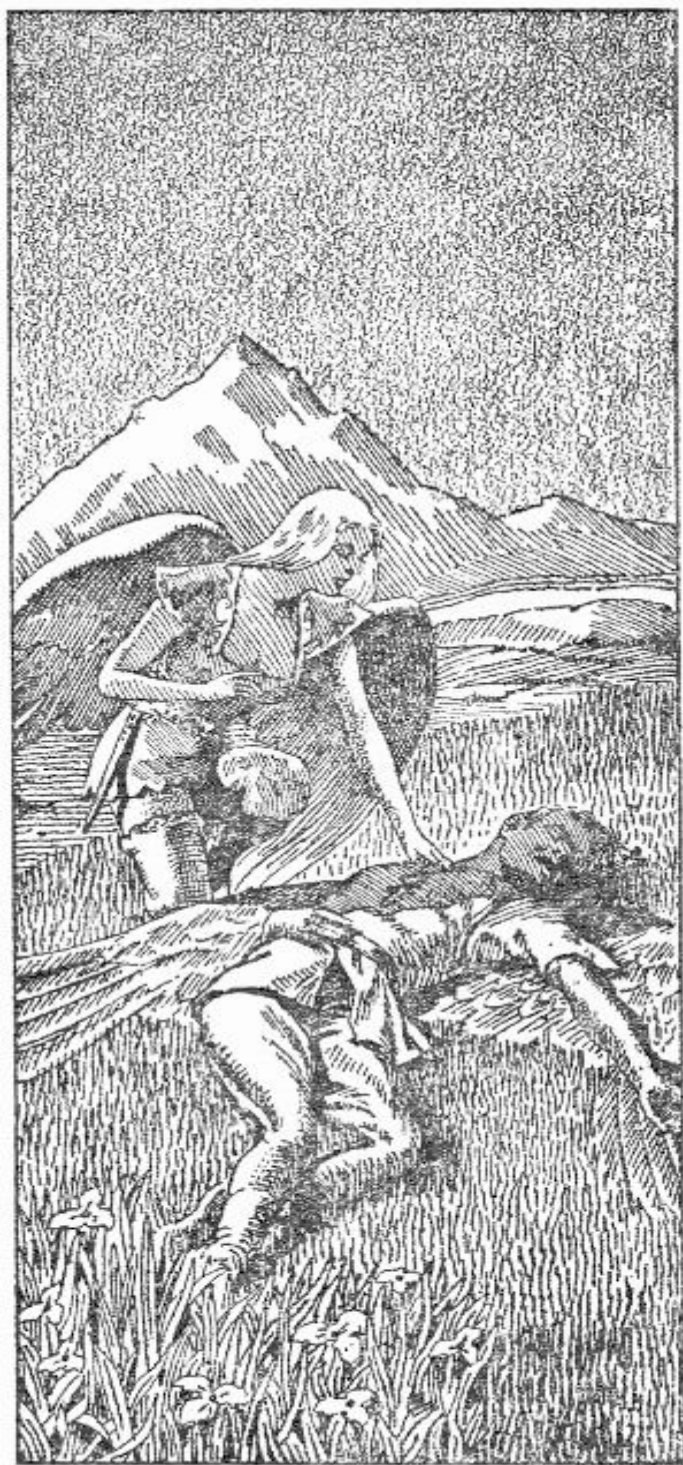
Kern felt a hand on his arm and roused himself out of a half-stupor.

He thought, I must be on the ground again, and made an instinctive effort to sit up. The motion threw him into a ludicrous spin and he opened his eyes wide to see the earth whirling far below him.

He was coasting at terrific speed through the upper air upon a cold, screaming highway of wind, and moving easily beside him, riding on broad pinions like his own, a girl paralleled his flight.

Long pale hair streamed behind her away from her blue-eyed face, whipped to pinkness by the blast. She was calling something to him, but the words were snatched from her lips by the wind and he heard nothing except that shrill, continuous howling all around them. He could see that she held him by one arm, and with her free hand was pointing downward vehemently. He could not hear her words, and knew he probably could not understand them if he did, but the gesture's meaning he could not mistake.

Nodding, he shrugged his left wing high and arched his body for a long downward spiral toward the ground. The girl turned with him, and together they glided sidewise across the rushing air-currents, delicately tacking against the wind, picking their way by instinctive muscular reactions of the spread pinions, while below them the ground swayed and turned like a fluid sea.



He heard a voice of impossible sweetness, and slowly, slowly, he felt warmth return to him (Chap. VII)

Kern glided downward on a wave of exultation like nothing he had ever experienced before in his life. He knew little about this world or about the girl beside him, but one thing stood out clearly—he was no longer alone. No longer the only winged being on an alien planet. And this long downward glide, like the motion of perfect dancers responding each to the other's most delicate motion, was the most satisfying thing he had ever known.

For the first time he realized one of the great secrets of a flying race—to fly alone is to know only half the joy of flying. When another winged being moves beside you on the airways, speed matching speed, wings beating as one, then at last you taste the full ecstasy of flight.

Kern was breathless with joy and excitement when the ground swooped up at them and he banked against the rush of his glide. With suddenly fluttering wings, he reversed his position in the air and felt with both feet for the solid earth. He had to run a little to cut down his speed, and the girl ran beside him, breathless and laughing a bit as she ran.

When they came to a halt and swung to face one another the long ashen hair blew forward in a cloud that had caught up with her at last, and she fought it, laughing, and brushed back the tangled mass with both hands, the pale wings the exact color of her hair folding back from her shoulders.

He saw now that she wore a tight tunic of some very fine, supple leather, and long tight boots of the same material. The hilt of a jeweled knife stood up against her ribs from a jeweled belt.

Around them the wind still blew cold and shrill, but the blast of it was slackening noticeably and warmth was creeping back little by little into the air. They stood on a wooded hill, under trees whose whipping branches added to the tumult of noise, and Kern could see a broad vista of the land before him, with no more of the vast bending giants of the hurricane moving across it. The storm must be over, he thought.

The girl spoke. She had a pleasant contralto voice, and the language she spoke was slightly guttural and of course entirely strange. Kern saw the surprise and doubt on her face when she saw that he did not understand her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're a pretty thing. I wish we could talk to each other."

She matched his smile, but the bewilderment deepened on her face.

Kern thought, She can't believe I don't know her language. Could that mean there's only one tongue spoken in this world? It's wishful thinking—I want so much to believe it! Because that might mean the people here are all winged, and move around so easily that separate languages haven't had a chance to evolve.

His heart was beating faster, with an eagerness that he found a little ludicrous. He had never suspected even in his own dreams how much it would mean to him to belong at last to a race that could accept him as one of its own. Bruce Hallam had set his machine in the aggregate pattern of the whole mutant group, knowing as he did so how unlikely it was that more than one of them could hope for an equivalent world on a single planet. But Bruce's skill being what it was, Kern told himself there was no reason to be surprised that the expected had happened.

This world was his own. A winged world. He was luckiest and first of the group to find a place where he belonged. Exultation closed up his throat with the joy of being no longer alien.

“Or maybe I’m building too much on one example,” he warned himself aloud. “Are we all winged in this world, girl? Say something, quick. I want to learn your language! Answer me, girl—are you an alien too, or is this the world where I belong?”

She laughed at him, recognizing the half-serious tone of his voice though the words meant nothing. And then her glance went across his shoulder, and a look of subtle withdrawal crossed her face. She said something in her guttural tongue and nodded toward the trees behind Kern.

He turned. A third winged figure was walking toward them under the still-roaring trees, wings whipped by the wind until the newcomer staggered now and then when the full blast caught him.

Kern was aware at first only of profound thankfulness. Another winged person was almost the answer to his remaining doubt. Where there were two, surely there must be many.

This was a man. Like the girl, he wore thin, tight leather and a dagger at his belt. His hair was red, and so were his silky wings, but his face was duskily tanned and Kern caught the flash of sidelong, light eyes as the man approached them. He saw, too, in another moment, that the newcomer was a hunchback. Between the shining reddish wings the man’s back was slightly crooked, so that he looked up at them with his head awry. He had a young face, with beautiful clear planes, beneath the darkness of his tan.

“Gerd—” the girl called, and then hesitated. He flashed the light eyes at her, and Kern decided it was probably his name.

The pale gaze moved back to Kern, and watched him searchingly as the hunchback fought the wind to the shelter of their tree. The man was wary, ready for distrust before he so much as saw Kern’s face. It was odd, in a way.

They talked, the girl excitedly in her contralto voice, guttural words tumbling over each other. Gerd’s answers were brief, in an unexpectedly deep tone. Presently he unsheathed his dagger and with it gestured toward Kern and the valley below them.

Kern bristled a little. There was no need for threats. If these people were still in a state of undevelopment where knives were their customary weapon, he was far beyond them in some ways at least. It was not a pleasant introduction to this world, where he felt himself already native, to have those first directions pointed out with a bare blade.

The girl, seeing his scowl, laughed gently and came forward to take his arm. She gestured Gerd away with her other hand, and he smiled grimly and stood back. The girl fluttered her wings a little and made a swooping gesture of her hand to indicate flight. She pointed to the valley. Then she stepped away to the brow of the hill, unfolded her wings, tested the dying wind with them, and leaned forward with sublime confidence into the void.

The updraft caught her beneath the pinions and bore her aloft on a beautiful sweep, her pale hair blowing like a banner. In midair she twisted to beckon, and Kern laughed in sheer delight and ran to follow her, spreading his dark wings so that at the fourth stride, with a leap, suddenly he was airborne. It was a glorious feeling to fly without shame or need of concealment. He scarcely heard the beat of wings behind him as the hunchback took to the air in their wake. The joy of flying in company was great enough just now to shut out all other thoughts from Kern’s mind.

They swept high along the slow-running river of wind over a winding valley. Kern, watching for the companions with whom he had entered this wonderful world, saw no motion at all among the trees they soared over. He caught sight presently of a cluster of roofs far

ahead, at the top of the valley, built around a stream that wound to and fro among the houses, and was filled with excited speculation as they neared the village.

My people, he thought. My own people. What kind of a town will it be, and what sort of culture? How fast can I learn the language? There's so much to find out.

The thought broke in his mind. For something—he had no name for it—was stirring very strangely through his body.

For an instant the whole airy world went blind around him. It was as if a new pair of lungs had opened up within him and he had drawn a deep, full breath of such air as no human ever tasted before. It was as if new eyes had opened in his head and he had looked on a new dimension with multiple sight. It was like neither of these, nor was it like anything a man ever experienced before. New, new, inexpressibly new!

And it was gone.

In flight Kern staggered a little, his wings forgetting to beat the sustaining air. The thing had come and gone so quickly, and yet it was not a wholly unfamiliar thing, after all. Once before something like it had happened. Something, different, but at the time heart-breakingly new. It was when he first felt the wings thrust out upon his shoulders. When he first felt the change within himself that cut him off from mankind.

“Am I changing again?” he asked himself fiercely. “Isn't the mutation over yet? I won't change! I belong here now—I won't let anything spoil that!”

The feeling was gone. He could not remember even now what it had been actually like. He would not change! He would fight change while breath remained in him. Whatever strange new mutation struggled now for being in his mysterious flesh he would strangle before he let it come between him and these people with wings.

It had gone, now. He would forget it. It should be as if it had never happened.

CHAPTER III

Gathering Danger

Sunlight winked from the diamond-paned windows of the village. They circled above the rooftops and came in against the wind for a landing on the high, flat roof of the central building, its open square paved with tiles painted in bright, crude pictures of flying men and women.

From above Kern could see the cobbled streets winding narrowly past overhanging eaves, little stone bridges arching the stream that gushed rapidly down through the village. Flowers were bright in narrow, ordered bands around the houses. There were steep streets that rose in steps around the curves of the hill upon which the town was based.

The roofs were steeply pitched, arguing a heavy snowfall in winter, but each of them had a landing area on the highest part of the house, usually facing a low door let into a gable. And Kern's last doubt departed. This was indeed a village of flying people. He had come into his own world at last.

His content lasted about five minutes.

Then they came down upon the brightly tiled landing-roof of what was probably the townhall, and Kern, already fluttering his wings for a landing, saw something that made him instinctively tighten the chest-muscles that controlled his wings so that they stiffened into broad pinions again. He soared and made a second circle about the rooftop.

The girl had reversed herself and was reaching with one foot for a landing when she saw what had startled him. She laughed and looked up, beckoning through the cloud of her settling hair.

Kern made a third circle, fighting the updraft among the houses while he looked down dubiously at the two dead men sprawled upon the roof. Both were young and both were winged. The girl walked delicately by them as if they were not there, settling her wings precisely. She stepped over the pool of blood, still liquid, that ran from a wound in the nearer man's neck, streaked across the width of his quiet pinion, and that puddled the brilliant tiles with a color of even brighter hue.

There was a measured beating of the air above Kern, and he looked up to see the hunchback hovering on silky red wings above him. Sunlight flashed on a bared knife-blade. Gerd gestured down. And there was something about his poise in the air, the way he handled his muscular, twisted body, that warned Kern not to precipitate a struggle. It occurred to him for the first time that fighting in midair must be an art requiring skills he had never learned—yet.

Gingerly he circled again and came down very lightly at the edge of the roof, holding his wings half-open until he was sure of his footing. The girl was waiting for him. She smiled, her blue glance flicking the dead men. Then she slapped her own dagger significantly, glanced at the bodies and back at Kern, and with a careless beckoning motion turned to enter the roof door.

A little dazed, Kern followed. Did she mean she herself had killed them? What extraordinary sort of culture had he found ready-made for him here? The first doubts stirring in his mind, he stooped his wings under the door-frame and groped down a narrow, curving

stairway behind the floating hair of his guide. Behind him he heard Gerd's feet thump uncompromisingly from step to step.

Voices came up the stair-well as they descended. At the bottom of the flight Kern followed the girl into a big stone-paved room, low-ceilinged, smoky from the fire that blazed in a huge cavern of whitewashed brick at one end of the roof.

The room was full of the living and the dead. Bewildered. Kern glanced about at the winged bodies which had obviously been dragged carelessly out of the center of the room and heaped against the walls. Blood lay in coagulating pools here and there on the flags. The men about the fireplace seemed to be debating something in loud voices. They looked up sharply as the girl entered. Then there was a clattering rush and a clamor of guttural voices as they hurried to greet her.

Kern made out one word among their sentences that seemed to be her name.

“Elje—Elje!”

Their voices echoed under the low ceiling, their wings made a rustle and soft clatter as they shouldered together around her. If it had not been for the unconsidered dead at their feet, Kern would have been happy without reservation, knowing at last beyond any doubt that this was a world of the winged.

They were talking about him, obviously. Elje, braiding her disordered hair, spoke rapidly and glanced from Kern to her companions and back again. Kern did not wholly like the looks of the men. Without wings, they would have seemed an undisciplined, violent group. Their faces were scarred and weather-beaten. All of them wore knives, and they had clearly been in a hard fight within the last few hours.

Among the dead on the floor there were men without wings. There were also, he saw now, a few women, some winged, some not. Two races? Somehow he surmised that was not true; there was a subtle likeness among them all, the wingless and the winged, that marked them of the same racial stock.

Presently he began to notice that the unwinged were all either elderly or adolescent. He remembered that his own wings had not begun to grow until he was past eighteen. Was it only in their prime that this race could fly? And would he, with advancing years, lose again this glorious attribute he had only now begun to enjoy?

The thought damped that surge of exultation which still flooded his mind beneath the surface bewilderment. And then he grinned wryly to himself, thinking:

“Maybe it won't happen. Maybe I won't live that long!”

For the looks of the grim men around him were not encouraging. If he had guessed right about a universal language in this world, it was not strange that his ignorance of it gave them room for suspicion. And in a village where life was held as cheaply as it was held here, he could probably expect direct and violent reactions to suspicion.

He was not far wrong. The men spoke among themselves in brawling voices a moment or two longer, the girl Elje braiding her hair carelessly and putting in a word now and then. While Kern stood there, debating with himself what was best to do, the argument came to a swift climax. Elje called something in a clear voice and, directly behind him, Kern heard a guttural monosyllable in answer, and the rustle of wings, and felt something cold and edged laid against the side of his neck.

He stood quite still. Then the hunchback, Gerd, sidled around into his view, holding the sharp knife with a steady hand against Kern's jugular. The pale eyes in the dark young face

were steady and full of cold threat.

Someone moved across the flagstones behind him and Kern felt hands draw his wrists together, felt the roughness of rope pulled tight around them. He did not protest. He was too surprised, and too unaccustomed to violence in his daily life, to know just now what course he should take. And he was filled still with the thought that these were his own people.

A something heavy and clinging fell suddenly across his wings. He jumped and looked back. It was a net, which a man with a scarred face and suspicious, squinting eyes was rapidly knotting together at the base of his pinions.

The hunchback grunted another monosyllable and drove the point of his knife against Kern's shoulder, jerking his red head toward a flight of stairs across the room. The winged men drew back to let the two pass, silent now and watching with impassive faces. Elje, finishing the last of the second braid, tossed the pale silken rope of it across her shoulder and would not meet Kern's eyes as he went by.

The stairs twisted unevenly through narrow stone walls. At the third level the hunchback threw open a heavy, low door and followed Kern into the room beyond. It was rather a pleasant little place, circular, with tile-banded walls and a tiled floor. The single window was barred and looked out over rooftops and distant hills. There was a low bed, a table, two chairs, nothing more.

The hunchback pushed Kern roughly toward one of the chairs. Both of them, Kern noticed, had low backs to clear the wings of those who might sit in them. He sank down and looked at the red-winged man expectantly. What happened then was the last thing, perhaps, that he might have expected to hear.

Gerd held out his dagger, level across his palm, pointed to it with the other hand and growled, "*Kaj*." He slapped his sheath then, said, "*Kajen*," and dropped the dagger into it. His pale eyes bored into Kern's.

Unexpectedly, Kern heard himself laughing. Partly it was relief, for he would not have been surprised to feel the edge of that knife called *kaj* sink into his throat once the door had closed behind them.

Instead, apparently this was to be a lesson in language. . . .

Once, in the night, he awoke briefly. Strange stars were shining through the bars of his window. He thought there was someone stealthily looking at him from beyond the bars, and sleepily realized that it would take as great skill to fly in silence as to walk without noise. But he saw no one. He slept again and dreamed it was Elje at the window, touching the bars with light fingertips as she smiled in at him in the starlight, her face dabbled with blood.

For two weeks he saw no one but Gerd. The pale eyes in the dark face became very familiar to him, and gradually the deep voice became familiar and understandable too. Gerd was a patient and indefatigable teacher, and the language was a simple one, made for a simple culture. Indeed, Kern learned it so rapidly that he began to catch Gerd's suspicious sidelong glances, and once, from his door, overheard a conversation on the stair outside when Gerd and Elje met.

"I think he may be a spy," the hunchback's deep guttural said.

Elje laughed. "A spy who doesn't speak our language?"

"He learns it too readily. I wonder, Elje—The Mountain is cunning."

"Hush," was all she answered. But Kern thereafter was careful to pretend he knew less of the language than he really did.

The Mountain. He thought of that in the long hours when he was alone. A mountain, strange of shape, the color of clouds, towering halfway up the heavens. It was more than inert matter, if these winged people spoke of it with that hush in their voices.

For a fortnight he waited and listened and learned. Once more, in the night, with the nameless stars looking in at the window, he felt that inexplicable stirring of, alien life deep within him, and was frightened. It passed quickly, and was gone too fast for him to put any name to it, or to remember it clearly afterward. Mutation? Continuing change, in some unguessable form? He would not think of it.

On the fourteenth night, the Dream came.

He had not thought very much about Bruce Hallam. Kua and the others. Subconsciously, he did not want to. This was his world and the other mutants were actually intruders, false notes in the harmony. Danger he might find here, even death, but it was a winged world, and his own.

There were dreams at night. Voices whispering, whose tones he half-recognized and would not allow himself to remember when he awoke. Something was searching for his soul.

Before that final contact on the fourteenth night, he had eavesdropped enough on other conversations held on the stairs between Gerd and Elje to understand a little of what went on around him.

Gerd was urging that they leave the town and return somewhere, and Elje was adamant.

“There’s no danger yet.”

“There is danger whenever we’re away from the eyrie. Not even the Mountain can guide enemies through the poison winds. Our safety has always been a quick raid, Elje, and then back to the eyrie. But to stay here, gorging ourselves—in a *town*—is madness.”

“I like the comfort here,” Elje said naively. “It’s been a long time since I’ve eaten and drunk so well, and slept on such a bed.”

“You’ll sleep on a harder bed soon, then,” Gerd said dourly. “The towns will gather. They must know already that we’re here.”

“Are we afraid of the townsmen?”

“When the Mountain walks—” the hunchback said, and left the sentence unfinished.

Elje’s laughter rang false.

That night, Kern felt seeking fingers try again the doors of his mind, and this time his subconscious resistance could not keep them out. He recognized the mind behind that seeking—the infinitely sad, infinitely wise mind of the mutant Byrna, with the lovely voice and the pale, unlovely face.

For a moment he floundered, lost in the depths of that intelligence so much more fathomless than his own. For a moment timeless sorrow washed him like the waters of the sea. Then he found himself again, and was looking, somehow, through new and different eyes, into a grassy hollow filled with starlight. Into Kua’s beautiful honey-colored face and her great single eye. Into Sam Brewster’s veiled gaze.

Dimly he groped for Bruce Hallam, who had opened the door for them all. Bruce was missing. And as for Byrna—it was Byrna’s eyes through which he saw them. Her mind, gripping his like the clasp of hands, cupping his like a bowl of still water. Soundlessly through space came a voice. Kua’s voice.

“Byrna, have you found him?”

“I think—yes. Kern! Kern!”

Without words, he answered them.

“Yes, Kua. Yes, Byrna. I’m here.”

There was resentment in Kua’s voice—the voice of her mind, for no words were spoken in this curious seance. Kern found time to wonder briefly if Byrna had always possessed this strange ability to bridge distances, or if it had burgeoned in her here as something struggled in himself for new being.

“We’ve been trying a long time, Kern,” Kua said coldly. “You were hard to reach.”

“I—I wasn’t sure you’d be here any longer.”

“You thought we’d have gone on to other worlds. Well, we would have, if we could. But Bruce was hurt. In the storm.”

“Badly?”

She hesitated. “We—can’t be sure. Look.”

Through Byrna’s eyes Kern saw Bruce Hallam’s motionless figure, lying silent on a bed of boughs. He looked oddly pale, almost ivory in color. His breathing was nearly imperceptible. And Byrna’s mind, groping through the void for his, found only a strange, dim spinning—something too far away and too abstract for the normal mind to grasp. She touched it briefly—and it spun out of contact and was gone.

“A trance?” Kua said. “We don’t know, yet. But we’ve used Byrna’s vision and learned a little about this world. How much do you know, Kern?”

Kern told them then, with Byrna’s tongue, too absorbed in the needs of the moment to realize fully what a strange meeting this was of more than human minds, over unguessed distances of alien land. He told them what he knew, what he had guessed from overheard conversations—not much, but a general picture.

“The planet’s mostly ocean. A small continent, about the size of Australia, I think. City-states all over it. Elje’s band are outlaws. They have a hideout somewhere, and they raid the towns. They seem—well, scornful of the townspeople, and a little afraid, too. I can’t quite understand that.”

“This—Gerd? He spoke of a Mountain?” Kua said.

“Yes. Something about—when the Mountain walks.”

“You know the Mountain,” Kua said. “The storm came from there. Those vortices of light and energy rose out of it.”

Kern remembered the spindles of blinding brilliance that strode across the land in the maelstrom of the winds. “We don’t understand much of it yet,” Kua was saying in a troubled tone. “We know there’s danger connected with that Mountain. I think there is life there, something we don’t know about. Something that probably couldn’t have developed on Earth. The conditions could have been too alien. But here anything is possible.”

Kern felt the thought forming in his brain—in Byrna’s brain.

“Life? Intelligent life? What do you know about it?”

“Maybe not life as we understand the word. Call it a—force. No, it’s more tangible than that. I don’t know—” The thought-voice of Kua faltered. “Dangerous. We may learn more of it, if we live. This much we’ve seen, though, through Byrna’s vision, and mine. We’ve sensed forces reaching out from the Mountain, into the minds of men. The minds of the winged townspeople. Assembling them for war.” She hesitated. “Kern, do you know they’re on their way now, to your town, where the outlaws are?”

He was instantly alert.

“Now? From where? How soon can they get here?”

“I’m not sure. They aren’t in my sight yet—over the horizon, that is. Byrna, tell him.”

The mind that held Kern’s stirred, and through it he saw as through a haze rank upon rank of winged beings flying with steady beasts of their pinions over a dark night-time terrain. Byrna’s thought murmured,

“You see, I can’t tell how far. It’s new, this clairvoyance since we came from Earth. I could always see but not so clearly, and I never could show others what was in my mind. So I only know these men are flying against your village.”

“And the force of men—the Mountain, I think, has armed them somehow,” Kua put in. “Byrna has seen the weapons they carry. You’d better warn your friends—your jailers or whatever they are. Otherwise you may be caught in the middle of a fight.”

“I will.” Kern’s mind was full now of something new. “You say you’ve developed this clairvoyance since the time when you came here, Byrna. Has it happened to the others, too?”

“To me, maybe, a little,” Kua said slowly. “A sharpening of focus, not much more than that. To Sam—” Her thought form glanced sidewise to Sam Brewster, sitting silent, with the hood of his secondary lids drawn over his terrible eyes, “—I think nothing’s happened. He can’t join our talk now, you see. Byrna’s mind can’t reach into his at all. We’ll have to tell him all that’s been said, later. And Bruce.” She shrugged. “Perhaps the winged people will tell you how we can help him. The edge of one of the vortices caught him, and he’s been like this ever since. We’d hoped to go on, you know, Kern, to find our own worlds as you—perhaps—have found yours. But without Bruce, we’re helpless.”

Kern was aware of a tightening and strengthening of his own mind as a problem at last came before him that must be met. Until now he had been almost in a trance of wonder and delight and dismay at the new things of this new, winged world. But the time for lassitude was over. He gathered his thoughts for speech, but Kua’s voice cut his beginning phrases short.

“Kern, there’s danger in the Mountain. The—thing—whatever it is, knows we’re here. It lives in the Mountain, or perhaps it *is* the Mountain. But Byrna has sensed hatred from it. Malevolence.”

There was a sudden harshness to her thought.

“Kern, you’re a soft fool!” Kua said. “Did you think you could reach Paradise without earning it? Whether you help us or not, you’ve got to face danger before you’ll find your place in this world, or any other. I don’t think you can manage without us. And we need your help, too. Together, we may still lose the battle. Separately, there’s no hope for any of us. *We know!* The Mountain may be a mutation as far beyond us as we are beyond the animals. But we’ve got to fight.”

Her voice blurred suddenly, faded to a thin drone. The starlit hill and the faces before him swirled and melted in Kern’s sleeping sight. He struggled for a moment against intangible danger—something formless and full of strong malevolence. He saw—what was it? A vast, coiling Something like a ribbon of fire, moving lazily in darkness and aware of him—terribly aware.

Far off in the void he felt the quiver of fright in a mind he knew—Byrna’s mind. But he lost the contact instantly, and then someone was shaking him by the shoulder and saying something in insistent, guttural tones.

He opened his eyes.

CHAPTER IV

Evil Mountain

In his vision, the coiling flame had left so brilliant an image upon his eyelids that for an instant he could see nothing but the blue-green scar of after-sight swimming upon his vision. Then that faded and he was staring up into Gerd's darkly handsome young face.

Kern struggled to sit up, beating his wings a little to help him rise. The gust stirred Kern's red hair and sent motes dancing in the beam of sunlight falling across the bed. Kern in the aftermath of amazement and terror forgot to dissemble his knowledge of the winged men's tongue. The simple syllables raced off his lips.

"Gerd, Gerd, you've got to listen to me! I've been finding out things I didn't suspect until now. Let me up. The townspeople are coming!"

Gerd put a hard palm against his chest.

"Not so fast. You seem to have learned our language in your sleep. No, stay there." His voice rose. "Elje!"

She was a moment or two in coming, and Gerd stood back with his hand on his dagger and his pale, suspicious eyes unswerving as he watched Kern. When Elje came, bright-faced in the morning sun, her ashen braids wound in a coronet that glistened against the high arch of her wings, he spoke without taking his eyes from Kern.

"Our guest awoke this morning with a strangely fluent knowledge of speech. I told you before of the danger from spies, Elje."

"All right, I do know more of your language than I pretended," Kern admitted. "I just learned it faster than you believed, that's all. That doesn't matter now. Do you know the townspeople are coming to attack?"

Gerd bent forward swiftly, half-open wings hovering above him in the sunlight.

"How do you know that? You *are* a spy!"

"Let him talk, Gerd," Elje said. "Let him talk."

Kern talked. . . .

In the end, he could see that they did not yet fully trust him. It was not surprising, for the tale would have bewildered anyone. But the prospect of an advancing army was enough to divide their thoughts.

"If I were a spy, would I warn you they were coming?" Kern demanded, seeing their dubious glances fixed on him at the end of his story.

"It isn't the army you'd be spying for," Gerd said reluctantly.

"Your other world—Earth," Elje murmured, her eyes searching Kern's. "If that were true, it could explain some things. But we know of no other worlds."

Briefly Kern thought that it might be easier for one of Elje's culture to believe in the existence of other worlds than for a denizen of some more sophisticated civilization. The people of this winged race had not yet closed their minds to all they could not see. It was not a race so sure of its own omnipotence that it denied all unfamiliar things existence.

"How could I hurt you now?" Kern said. "Why should I warn you, if I were on their side?"

"It's the Mountain," Elje said surprisingly. "Why do you suppose we kept you here in this bare room, without furnishings, without anything you could build into a weapon? Or do you know?"

Bewildered, he shook his head.

“We were not sure if you were a slave to the Mountain. If you were, a coil of wire, a bit of iron—anything—would have been dangerous to us in your hands.” Her eyes were questioning.

Again Kern shook his head. Gerd began to speak, his voice faintly derisive.

“A long story and an evil one. Perhaps you know it. At any rate, we’re the only free people in this world. Oh, there may be a few others, but not many, and they don’t live long. The Mountain is jealous of its slaves. Aside from our group, all the rest of mankind belongs to the Mountain. All!”

“This Mountain?” Kern said. “What is it?”

Gerd shrugged his red wings.

“Who knows? Demon—god. If we ever had a history, no one knows it now. No legend goes back beyond the coming of the Mountain. We only know that it has always been there, and from it, whispers float out to men in their sleep, and they become slaves to the whisper. Something happens in their minds. For the most part they live as they choose, in their cities. But sometimes that voice comes again, and then they’re mindless, doing as the Mountain bids them.”

“We don’t know what the Mountain is,” Elje said. “But we know that it’s intelligent. It can guide men’s hands to make weapons, when there’s a need for weapons. And it can send out storms, such as the one in which we found you. Not for a long, long while has there been a storm out of the Mountain. If you’re not a spy, how do you explain the fact that your coming and the storm happened in the same hour?”

He shrugged. About that, he also was puzzled.

“I wish I knew. But I’ll find out, if any human can. Do you mean the army that’s coming against you is sent by the Mountain? Why?”

“As long as we remain free, the Mountain will try to enslave us,” Elje said. “And we’ll fight the townsmen for the things we need, since we don’t dare fight the Mountain. We’ve stayed too long in this village—yes, Gerd, I know! We’ll return to the eyrie now. If an army of the townfolk is coming, they’ll have weapons the Mountain made them build, and the weapons will be dangerous, whatever they may be this time.”

“The prisoner may know all this already,” Gerd said dourly. “That doesn’t matter. But it will matter if we take him to the eyrie. He could lead our enemies there, Elje.”

“Through the poison winds?” But Elje drew in her lower lip thoughtfully. “He tells a mad story, Gerd. I know that. Could it be true?”

“Well, what then?”

“These companions he spoke of. They sound like gods. And they talked of fighting against the Mountain.”

“Fight against the stars,” Gerd said and laughed. “But not the Mountain. Not even gods could win such a war.”

“They aren’t gods,” Kern said. “But they have powers none of us know. I think our coming marks a turning place in the history of your race, Elje—Gerd. You can kill us or abandon us and go on as you always have, or you can believe me and help us, and fight this time with a chance of winning. Will you do it?”

Elje was silent for a moment. Then she laughed and stood up suddenly with a flutter of her wings.

“I’ll go along with you and talk to your friends,” she said. “If they’re as you say—yes, Kern, I’ll believe you. For the Mountain never has changed human flesh. It can touch our minds, but not our bodies. I think in the beginning were men whose brains had some weakness that let the whisper come in, and those men were armed by the Mountain and killed their fellows, until only we outlaws remained.

“Our minds over the generations have been bred to resist invasion as the townspeople were bred to welcome it. I think—I know—if the Mountain could reach into our bodies and make that tiny change that would open our mind to it, then it would win. But it can’t. It can’t alter our bodies except by killing us. If I see with my own eyes these companions of Kern’s, I’ll know there is a power greater than the Mountain. And we’ll fight together, Kern!”

A little later, floating high above the nest of hills which cradled the village, Kern rocked on spread wings and pressed his eyes tightly shut, thinking with all the strength of his mind:

“Byrna, Byrna! Answer me, Byrna! Help me find you. Byrna, do you hear?”

Silence, except for the small noises drifting up from far below, distant shouts as Elje’s winged band collected in haste the loot they would take with them to their eyrie. Kern’s vision swam with the flecked clouds of sunlight on closed lids. Deliberately he blanked his mind to receive an answer. None came.

“Byrna! There may not be time to waste. Byrna, Kua, answer me!”

In his eagerness and impatience he remembered again what he had glimpsed dimly through Byrna’s memory, the ranks of armed fliers moving through the night on steadily beating wings toward the village. Perhaps from so far away they would not arrive for many hours—perhaps so near that the cloud on the horizon now was not mist, but armed men. . . .

“Byrna! Do you hear me?”

“*Kern!*” The answer he sought came with sharp impact, like a blow in the face. As if she were almost at his side and speaking with dreadful violence. He caught terror in the contact of minds, cold, controlled terror that chilled him so the sunny air turned suddenly icy around him. He knew instantly that she had heard him before, had been hedging for just the right contact so that there need be no wasted moments of groping and finding focus upon one another. He caught the hard impact and the terror and the urgency in the moment their minds met. Then her thoughts tumbled into his mind:

“Kern! Hurry! No time to waste. Do you see the grove of blooming trees left on the horizon? Come! Make new contact there.”

She blanked as suddenly as she had entered his mind. And because thoughts are so infinitely more rapid than words she had conveyed those four ideas—identification, haste, locality and a promise of future contact—in almost no lapse of time at all. But in that brief instant while their minds did meet, something happened.

Kern rocked on shaken wings as if a blow had jolted him. He snatched his mind back from the brief touch with Byrna’s quickly, quickly, scorched with the incandescent hatred that had blazed in the void between them. For the coiled ribbon of fire which had swum so strangely through nothingness when he woke from his clairvoyant dream was awake and alive now, and terribly avid.

It had been waiting, he knew in the instant while his mind leaped back in recoil from that burning contact. It had found them as he waked slowly from the long, leisured conversation in the seance.

Since that moment it had lain, coiled, in waiting. *It?*

Folding his wings, he dropped forward in a long, breathtaking dive, the air screaming past his ears. From a tiled rooftop far below, he saw two figures rise, one on pale wings, one on glossy red. He spread his own pinions then, exulting in the strain on his chest-muscles when the broad surfaces checked his dive, bore him up in a steep arc that made the air feel warm and solid as he carved a long curve through it.

“That way,” he told Elje, pointing, when she rose within hearing. “We’ll have to hurry. There’s something wrong. I think perhaps the Mountain, or Something in the Mountain, knows we’re here.”

Elje’s clear bright color blanched in the sunlight. Behind her, Gerd’s eyes flashed sideward in the dark face, suspicious, mistrusting still.

“Why do you say that?”

Kern told them as they flew, the grove of blossoming trees on the horizon seeming to slip rapidly down the edge of the skyline and draw nearer far below. It was not easy to talk and fly. Kern’s breath began to come fast, and his chest and wings ached with the speed, after so many days of inactivity. When he finished speaking there was silence.

“The eyrie lies that way,” Elje said presently, in a controlled voice. She pointed right with a smooth bare arm. “I’ve sent most of the men on with our loot. Gerd chose twenty to follow us. You don’t know where or how far the Mountain’s men are?”

Kern shook his head. “Maybe I can find out at the next meeting with Byrna.”

He glanced behind them and saw the little band of Elje’s bodyguard flying a few minutes in their rear, big men all of them, with stolid, hard-eyed faces. Several carried light wicker squares looped up with straps.

“Seats for your friends, Kern,” Elje explained. “We need them when we carry our young people or our old ones, who no longer have the power to fly.” Her face darkened, as Kern knew their faces always did when the winged people thought of the days in which they would no longer travel the lanes of air.

It occurred to him then that their battles might be ferocious things, fought by men as fanatic in their own way as those who fought on Earth for entry into an imagined paradise. For these men fought their own old age as surely as they fought an enemy. No one who has once spread wings upon the air-currents willingly faces a life without wings.

The blooming grove was beneath them now.

“If you make contact this time with—it—again, Kern, I think *it* will know more easily where to direct its men,” Elje said. “There is great danger. Will you let this meeting with your friends go for awhile? You may be doing them harm as well as us. The army of the Mountain may be very near now.”

Kern hesitated. He had been dreading with every wingbeat the moment when he must open his mind again to that coiled and scorching malevolence. For an instant he toyed with the idea of postponing searching for Byrna’s mind, but he knew it would only mean putting off the inevitable. Grimly he shook his head.

“Byrna!” he called out mentally. “Byrna, what next?”

As before, for long moments there was no answer. Then briefly, like a gasp, he caught the touch of Byrna’s mind—only briefly and very incoherently, because between them in the instant of contact flashed the blinding hatred of the—the interloper. Only when their minds touched, apparently, could the white-hot malevolence reach them, but it lay ambushed and ready, and this time it seemed to flare out between them almost before Byrna’s voice could speak.

Reeling back, shaken and stunned by the thing between them, Kern caught only a ragged thought or two from Byrna's mind.

"Three hills—hurry—army!"

That was all that got through. For an instant the void flamed with the blankness of sheer hatred. Then Kern opened his eyes and caught himself on reeling wings. Elje and Gerd watched him without speaking as he controlled his shaken faculties with a great effort. Elje was white with terror, but on Gerd's face suspicion was still predominant.

Three hills in a shadowy row cut the horizon line. Kern gestured toward them and in silence the little group flew on. If Byrna's gasp of "—army—" meant the enemy were nearly upon them, there was nothing to do except fly as they had been flying, in the hope of reaching the mutants before disaster overtook them all.

CHAPTER V

Pursuit

The three hills were not quite below them, and Kern was watching the skyline anxiously for signs of the winged army which was moving against them, when something from below flashed across his eyes. He blinked and looked down. From a clump of trees the light-beam flashed again, dazzlingly, from a tiny point of brilliance. Then a small figure stepped out from the shelter of the branches, waving at him.

It was Kua. Even from this height he could see the reflected light in twin points on the sun-glasses she held in one hand. She had signalled him by the heliograph with the only thing they had for reflecting light.

Pointing downward, he let one wing tilt high and came about in a long glide, lying at full length upon the air with his heels higher than his head. The ground swung, like water in a cup and Kua seemed to rush upward to meet him as the swift dive cut the space between them.

The others were with her by the time Kern had put his feet to the grass. He was conscious, as always, of a little shock of memory renewed when he met again Kua's great single gaze from the center of her forehead. Byrna, hurrying to meet him, lifted a pale, drawn little face.

"Kern!" she cried in a voice that was pure music. And he thought there was in her eyes, and in Kua's, a subtle something that was new to him. Mutation had gone on, perhaps, with them as with him, a step beyond Earthly mutation. Their powers were strengthened, so that, in part, they both were strangers to him.

Sam Brewster came out smiling and extending his hand, and Kern took it with the little inward quailing he had always felt before Sam, the instinctive averting of his gaze from Sam's veiled eyes. Beyond Sam's shoulder he saw Bruce Hallam lying motionless, as if he had not stirred since they laid him on the pallet of boughs. His face was ivory-hard and as withdrawn from living as the face of a statue that had never known life.

Everything was confused for a few moments. Byrna was crying, "Hurry, hurry!" and Kua's distance-piercing glance kept sweeping the horizon as the winged people swooped to the ground behind Kern and came forward swiftly, wings half open to speed their hurrying feet.

Kern heard Elje's little gasp of incredulity and dismay when Kua's blue central eye turned upon the newcomers, but the winged girl was too good a commander to waste time after that first glance which confirmed what Kern had told her.

In a matter of seconds they were in the air.

Bruce Hallam, still motionless in his mysterious slumber, had been swung on a wicker carrier between two burly fliers. The other three mutants, in their seats between winged bearers, scarcely had time for amazement or uncertainty as they were wafted aloft.

Kern, flying with the rest over the rolling hilltops with the vast glass cloud of the Mountain shadowing the horizon, timed his flight to the pace of the slowest so that he might talk in midair with the wingless people in the carriers. And close beside him Elje and Gerd hovered, watching almost jealously every expression on the faces of the speakers.

"What do they say, Kern?" Elje asked breathlessly, timing her words to the rhythm of her wings. "Are—are you sure these people are human? I never saw such—such—creatures. Gerd, after all could they be gods?"

Gerd laughed shortly, but there was uneasiness in his voice.

“Let them talk. Is the enemy near yet? Ask them, Kern.”

“Near, I think,” Byrna said. She was clutching the straps of her swaying chair with both tiny hands and her incredibly musical voice might have been crooning a song instead of shaping the syllables of terror which echoed the look in her eyes. “Kern, I don’t dare—look—for them any more! You saw what happened! Kern, tell me what it was *you* saw.

“I? Fire, I think. A coiling ribbon of it—and hate. I could almost see the hate!”

“The Mountain,” Byrna said, her eyes turning automatically toward the great cloud hanging ominously in the sky. “What do you know about it, Kern? Have these people told you?”

Briefly he gave her the story Elje had recounted.

“It has never yet been able to change people physically, or there wouldn’t be any outlaws left,” he finished. “At least, so Elje thinks. Byrna, I wonder if it could change us? We’re malleable—abnormally malleable. I—”

He hesitated. Not even to Byrna did he yet want to speak of the deep, mysterious stirrings he had felt in his own flesh.

“You think you and Kua may have felt something like a changing in yourselves?”

Byrna nodded, her eyes wide and distressed. “We can’t tell how much, yet. Maybe the Mountain is the cause of it.”

Unexpectedly Sam Brewster, swinging between his carriers above Byrna, leaned forward.

“The Mountain’s where the answer is, Kern. I don’t think we’ll be safe until we’ve explored it.”

“Safe!” Kern said grimly. “If you’d seen what I have, you’d never talk that way.”

“It won’t matter,” Kua called from a little way ahead, twisting in her seat to send a piercing blue gaze back at them. “Look! They’re coming!”

Kern’s sharp exclamation as he banked swiftly and turned to follow her pointing finger was explanation enough to Elje and Gerd what was happening. A shiver of excitement ran through the whole flying group, a tightening of muscle and mind. For an instant their pace slackened, simultaneously, without signal, almost as a flight of birds wheels simultaneously at no perceptible message.

There was nothing visible on the horizon where Kua pointed.

“I can see the first of them—a long line,” she said. “They’re carrying something, butee I’m not sure what it is. Round things—nets of something shining, like thin wire. Light’s flashing from it when the sun hits them.”

Rapidly Kern told Elje.

“New weapons,” she said. “I expected that. I wonder—well, we’ll know soon enough.” She beat her wings together and soared suddenly above the group, looking down with speculative eyes.

“We’re going too slowly. Kern.” She flashed a glance at him. “This other friend of yours, the injured one. He’s heavy. He slows us. And he takes two men out of the fight if we’re caught. I think—” She made an expressive downward gesture.

“No!” Kern said quickly. “He’s the most powerful of us all, if we can rouse him.”

“Well, he must be first to fall, if the need comes,” Elje said. “But we’ll wait.” She called commands to the group flying before them, and eight men wheeled in the air and swung back.

Kern watched them slip smoothly, without a break in their wing-beats, into the harness of the wicker carriers, relieving those who had borne the burden this far.

“Now, quickly!” Elje said. “The eyrie!”

They were almost over the jagged hills where the outlaws’ refuge lay, when the first ranks of the enemy swept over the skyline and saw them. The fugitives had flown low, taking advantage of every line of hills and trees for cover, and despite their burden they flew fast, their pace nearly matching that of the pursuers because of the all-night flight the enemy had made.

But they had not yet reached shelter when the sound of a horn, clear and high, fell through the sunny air, and after it, drowning out the thin, sweet notes, the roar of angry men sighting their prey.

Elje was very calm.

“Gerd,” she said. “You’ll lead the way in?”

“No!” he growled. “Let one of the captains go. I feel like a fight.”

“Stay, then,” Elje answered.

She called a command to a man in the front rank of her little party. They were flying as fast as wing could carry them toward a gap between two jagged, dark hills through which Kern could see a wilderness of tortured rock beyond. It looked volcanic in origin, and waves of intermittent heat and strange metallic odors drifted to them on the wind as they approached.

“There are poisonous currents in these hills,” Elje told Kern as they swept forward. “Many of us died before we learned the way through them. Now we have a shelter where no one can follow us who hasn’t a guide.”

Abruptly she ceased to speak. Kern turned a startled glance and saw her reel in midair, throwing back her head so that the clear line of her throat was white and taut against the blue sky. Then, without a word, suddenly she crumpled in full flight. An instant longer her wings sustained her and she hung limp from the spread pinions. Then they too folded back and she dropped like a stone.

Time stopped for Kern. Everything stood still, the hills with their floating vapors, the flying troupe, the breeze halted among the trees below. He could see the first ranks of the oncoming enemy halted too and hanging motionless in space, their shouts nothing but a buzz in his ears.

He saw too, very clearly, the great ovals of the weapons they carried, and the light that whirled in intricate, thin patterns like wires of brilliance within the ovals. He saw the cone of light reach out from the nearest oval and touch another of the fugitive fliers.

It had happened in an instant, and it was over. Kern dived for Elje’s falling body almost before she had ceased to speak, swung under her, caught her across his arms in a welter of slack wings and loosened hair.

Gerd’s harsh voice was shouting orders above him. By the time Kern had labored up to their level with his burden he saw the newly-appointed guide of the winged men vanishing into the cleft between the hills, leading two by two the harnessed pairs who carried the mutants.

The roar of savage voices behind them filled the shaken air, and the roar of countless wings beating in ranks as the enemy swooped upon them. They were very near now—so near Kern could see the distorted, shouting faces and the flash of knives in the hands of the foremost.

It was a strange and eerie thing to realize that no human hatred burned behind the angry faces, but the fiery, venomed malignancy which was the Mountain. Or did this oncoming rabble know why it fought? Did they think this fury their own emotion, not a monstrously inspired rage that turned them to automatons?

A cone of light swung past Kern, numbing his wing-tip, and touched a fast-flying man in front of him between the wings. The man jolted convulsively, arched backward and then crumpled to hang for an instant motionless on the momentum of his own flight. The wings folded as Elje's had done, and the man dropped downward out of sight.

Gerd was gesturing Kern frantically on. The hunchback hovered on red pinions recklessly in full view of the enemy, knives flashing in each hand, ready to engage whoever came within reach of his blades. He was shouting hoarse orders scarcely audible above the rushing thunder of the enemies' wings and their voices bellowing for blood.

The last of the little band was pouring through the hill-cleft now, Kern almost the last of all with his limp burden hanging across his arms. The air was full of twisting vapors and he could not see very clearly as he swept closer to the hills. It was, curiously, a nightmare sensation, half-blindness from the poison vapors and half-deafness from the roar of wings and voices. He could only follow the back of the man ahead, dimly seen through the mists. Elje hung motionless in his arms, her trailing wings fluttering a little to the measured beat of his own.

The last thing he saw as he glanced back was Gerd poised above the cleft to follow him in, ready to fight a rear-guard action if need be. And then, all in one brief glance between drifts of vapor, Kern's heart contracted as he saw two more winged shapes beating desperately toward him through the dimness, two men flying tandem with a harnessed burden between them.

It was Bruce Hallam's bearers. And Elje had been right. Bruce's weight was too great for the flying men to carry fast enough. Evidently they had been left too far behind to follow the other bearers in and had only now made up the distance which would save them.

Or would it save them?

In spite of himself, Kern tilted his wings and hesitated in the air, twisting his head to watch. He saw Gerd gesturing savagely to hurry them in—heard the hunchback's deep howl.

"Drop him!" Gerd howled. "Drop him and come on!"

But before they could obey, a cone of white fire swept silently through the coiling fog and enveloped bearers and burden alike in a bath of radiance.

There was no sound, except for the all-encompassing uproar of the pursuit. In silence the doomed fliers stiffened and glided an instant still carrying their fatal weight between them—and then dropped.

The three of them vanished together into the engulfing mists.

Kern flew on with Elje.

He labored on leaden wings through the fog. Whiffs of burning vapor stung in his nostrils and set his pumping lungs on fire. Elje was an almost unbearable weight in his arms.

Coughing, choking, ready to think every wing-beat his last, he stumbled through the air in the wake of the man before him, his only guide through this aerial labyrinth of poison. Hot updrafts caught him and tossed him aloft, cross-currents fetid with strangling vapors sent him into perilous side-slips toward the jagged black peaks dangerously near. At this speed he knew he could not survive the slightest contact with those knife-edged rocks.

And Bruce's loss was a heavier burden to bear than even Elje's dead weight. For only Bruce could have opened the doors for the rest to escape into worlds of their own. And upon Bruce's uncanny skill he had pinned his highest hopes of freeing this world from its enemy.

Strangling, choking, muscles aching from the strain of long flight, he reeled on in the wake of the flying outlaws.

The end of the ordeal came without warning. One moment he was flying blindly through the updrafts and the smoke, the next he found himself floating in clear still air over what seemed a great lip of rock. Winged men below gestured him down and he dropped slowly on aching wings and let his feet touch the rock gingerly.

Elje coughed in his arms as he shifted weight from wings to feet. Electrified, he looked down, forgetting everything else in this new surprise. He had been certain she was dead or dying. She opened her eyes, looked at him blindly, and let the lashes flutter down again. But at least she was still alive.

The men of her band closed around them then and one of them took Elje from his arms. Kern looked around curiously as he followed Elje's bearer across the rock.

A cavern lifted its high arched entrance before them, black rock without and within, and the lip of rock thrust out before it, black too. Above the platform, which must have been two hundred feet across, the air was still and no poisonous vapors swirled, but they still rose all around the edges of the rock and leaned together high above like a tent roof that blotted out the sky except for occasional rifts far overhead. It was like a painter's concept of Hades, even to the winged men with the hard, violent faces swarming out to meet the newcomers.

The mutants were among them. Kern told them shortly of Bruce's loss. He did not want to dwell on it, for it seemed a death-blow to the hopes of the others and perhaps to his own, too, if this world was ever to be peopled by any but automatons.

None of the mutants spoke after he had told them. The loss was a stunning one and Byrna's sad, small face grew sadder and very pale, while Kua's great blue eye filled with tears as she turned away. Sam Brewster muttered something under his breath and for an instant Kern saw the veiling secondary lids twitch across his eyes, as they always twitched when Sam was angry, in involuntary preparation to draw back.

"Sam!" Kern said sharply. Sam grimaced and turned away too, closing the secondary lids again.

Inside the cavern, on a straw mattress under a stretched crimson tent, Elje was lying. A fire burned in a crude hood of rocks, its heat cupped in the red tent and reflected back again upon the bed. Someone was holding a bowl of steaming liquid to her lips as Kern came up.

Kern watched her drain it slowly. When she lay back upon the cushions her eyes remained open and she looked around the circle of watching men with understanding dawning in her face. Color came back into it after awhile, and then she coughed again and sat up.

"All right," she said. "I'm better. What happened?"

Kern told her.

"Gerd?" she asked when he had finished. The men looked at one another inquiringly. A growl of dissent went through the cavern. No one had seen him. Someone rose on heavy wings and flapped out under the dome to search the platform outside. Gerd was not to be found. Elje's face darkened.

"We could afford to lose twenty men better than Gerd," she said. "You say he was last behind you, Kern? Didn't you hear any fighting as you came in?"

Kern shook his head. "I couldn't tell. I thought he was following me. The last I saw was Bruce and his carriers going down."

Elje bit her lip. "I'm sorry. We'll miss him. He was one of the bravest and most loyal of us all. He's been with us only a year, but I'd come to depend more on his judgment than—" She broke off. "Well, it can't be helped. I suppose the light-cones got him. I wonder how they work." She flexed her wings and tried her muscles out experimentally. "The rays don't seem to leave any after-effects. I suppose the fatalities are meant to come from the fall. Well, at least we're lucky to have got away without any worse losses."

She got to her feet and shook her head tentatively, shook her wings out and made two or three uncertain beats that nearly lifted her off the floor.

"I'm all right now." She spread her hands to the blaze for it was damply chill in the cavern. "The Mountain's angry," she said. "It isn't only our raid on the village that brought this army out against us. There was that storm, too. Kern, I think the Mountain knows you're here and is trying to—to finish you. Have you any idea why?"

Kern had, vague theories too inchoate to put into words. He shook his head instead. Elje laughed shortly.

"Gerd wouldn't trust you. If he were here, he'd say it was your fault the enemy had gathered against us. He'd say to put you out and let you shift for yourselves, all of you. Is there any reason why I shouldn't?" Her voice was suddenly hard.

Disconcerted, Kern stared at her. "If you don't know any—" he began, but she broke in quickly.

"You saved my life," she conceded, "but we're not a sentimental people. We can't afford to be. If your presence here is a menace to the safety of us all, I can't indulge my own gratitude by putting my men in danger. We must each contribute to the strength of the group, or perish." She shrugged. "You're one extra fighting man, but what about your friends? Have they abilities to counterbalance their being earth-bound?"

"I think they have. This much is sure, Elje. Unless we can prevail against the Mountain somehow, I believe we mutants at least are doomed. Our coming has upset the balance in your world and the Mountain knows it and intends to be rid of us. Well, we've lost our best man, Bruce Hallam. With his help we might have moved openly against the Mountain. Without him, we are greatly handicapped." Kern grimaced wryly. "Remember, Byrna and I have been in—call it in tune—with whatever it is that constitutes the Mountain. We know what we're facing. But I don't see any choice. It's kill or be killed."

Behind him Kua's gentle voice spoke. "Kern," she said. He turned. Elje turned too, and from the corner of his eye, he saw her recoil involuntarily from the strangeness of Kua's face.

Kua's wide blue eye, with depth upon depth shining in it, was staring at the rock wall above the fireplace. Her face had a look of concentration and withdrawal upon it, as if in all but body she were miles away.

"Kern!" she said again. "There are men coming. Many men. I think they are the same ones who were following us outside." She hesitated, glancing quickly at Elje's face, her eye refocusing swiftly and then going back to the solid wall.

"Kua, you can see them?" Kern demanded. "Do you mean it? Do you know you're not looking through empty spaces now, Kua? You're looking through rock!"

The shock of realization on Kua's face as she turned to him was answer enough. "I am!" she gasped. "It never—that hasn't happened before. Kern, it's true that we're changing. More

than we know, until something like this happens! But I can see them. I can see through the side of the mountain.”

Again she turned to stare with her fathomless gaze into distances no human eye ever pierced before, unaided.

“They’re coming,” she said. “Through the mists, the way we came.”

Swiftly Kern told Elje what she had said. Elje leaned forward abruptly.

“Through the labyrinth?” she cried. “But they can’t! No one can come that way without a guide. They won’t get far before they’re overcome by the gasses.”

“They have a guide,” Kua said in a strangely gentle voice, turning her gaze upon Elje. “Your friend. Gerd.”

CHAPTER VI

Betrayal

Horried silence filled the cave for a moment when Kern ceased his translation. Then bedlam broke out. The encircling men who had listened so far in silence burst into violent speech, some deriding Kua's claim, some cursing Gerd. Elje silenced them with a sharp command.

"I don't believe you," she said flatly. "Gerd wouldn't betray us."

Kua shrugged. "You'd better prepare to meet them," was all she said.

For a moment Elje's composure broke. "But I don't—it can't be Gerd! He wouldn't! Kern, how *can* we meet them? They're a hundred to our one! This was our last refuge. If they're coming here, all is lost!"

"They don't know we're expecting them," Kern said. "That's our only advantage. Make the most of it. Is there any room for ambushes along the way?"

Elje shook her head. "It's almost a single-file path everywhere. And Gerd knows it better than even I do." Her wings drooped. Listlessly she stared into the fire. "This is the end of all resistance to the Mountain," she said. "This is the day *it* wins the fight. None of us can come out alive. Gerd! I can't believe it!"

"The Mountain—you think?" Kern asked her.

"It must be that. He passed all our tests—and we have rigid ones—but somehow he must have been able to hide the truth from us. He's one of the Mountain's slaves and, when it commanded, he had to obey."

"That proves it!" Kern said suddenly. "Why should the Mountain move against you today of all days, unless it has something to fear? Gerd's been with you a year, you say. The Mountain could have struck any hour of all that time. But it waited—for an emergency. And this is the emergency. If it's afraid of us, then maybe we're stronger than we know. Maybe—"

From the mists outside the high, hollow notes of a horn broke into his speech. Kern spun around. Voices rose in angry babble from the platform. There was a beating of wings that made a noise almost deafening under the dome of the cavern, and the fire flared wildly, the red canvas of Elje's tent flapped in the blast as the outlaws rushed to the defense of their last refuge. Elje, shouting commands, rose with them.

Kua and Byrna turned white faces to Kern. Sam Brewster, behind them, looked a question. Rapidly Kern told them what had been said.

"You'd better wait here," he finished. "I don't know what's coming, but you'll be safer inside."

Sam smiled a grim and dreadful smile. "I can help," he reminded Kern. "I'll come outside."

Together they walked to the door of the cave. There was tumult beyond, but an orderly tumult. Ranks of the winged outlaws were hurrying aloft to hang overhead in wait. Elje marshaled the rest with a hopeless sort of efficiency into reserves. Before she had finished, the horn sounded again, on a note of triumph, and the first of the enemy burst through the fog upon them.

"You see," Elje said to Kern, the hopelessness clear in her voice. "They wanted us out in the open where they could finish us quickest. They even gave warning so we'd be waiting for

them. That's how sure they are of us."

From the front of the platform a wave of the outlaw fighters, knives flashing in their hands, rose to meet the newcomers. And from above a second wave dived on half-closed wings. For a few moments there was a bloody melee at the mouth of the aerial entry where the enemy poured through.

"We can hold them five minutes," Elje said. "After that, we're through."

Now for the first time Kern saw how the winged men fought. The hawk-dive was the thing he thought of as he watched the fighters swoop on their prey, saw the flash of knives held at an expert angle for the slash that would cripple wing-muscles and send the victim hurtling helplessly to the ground. One sweeping cut across the chest-muscles was enough to put a man out of the fight.

But if the intended prey saw his adversary coming, then it was a matter of soaring and swooping for position. And Kern saw many times a winged man, outmaneuvered by his enemy, rise on desperate wings and hurl himself headlong into a death-like embrace, wings folded, so that the two fell like a single plummet, each striving frantically as they dropped twisting through the air for a blow that would cripple his adversary and break the wing-locked grip before the ground came too near.

Now the gush of the enemy through the fog had become too great to stem as they poured by the score out of their narrow entry. The fight which had for a few minutes hovered at the mouth of the gap swept backward and upward until the great tent of vapor over the platform was filled with struggling men, and the air was blackened with the shadows of their wings.

"They aren't using those light-cones," Kern said. "I've been waiting to dodge but none have come through yet. Why?"

"I think because the Mountain sends out the light-beam that focuses through the wires," Elje told him. "That's the way their weapons usually work. And the Mountain can't penetrate our mists and our rocks here. They've got to fight hand-to hand—but they can do it. There are too many of them. I—Kern, look! Is that Gerd?"

A flash of red wings and red hair showed through the melee as someone went by on whistling wings, too fast to see clearly. Kern caught one glimpse of a dark face and pale, fixed eyes—and thought there was grief in the eyes and the distorted face in that one glancing look he caught of it.

Elje, beside him, shouted something across the platform and from its lip another wave of men rose in the hopeless defense of their stronghold.

"We'll go up with the last," Elje said quietly, glancing over her shoulder at the men who remained. "One more wave and then—the last. This way we'll kill the greatest number before it's over. Have you a knife, Kern?"

As she spoke a man with a dripping knife soared past them over the edge of the platform, blood falling from a dozen wounds, face set in blind, fanatic violence. Squarely before them they saw him falter in midair, his gaze going past them to something in the shadow of the cave. Abruptly then he stiffened, his chin jerked up and his wings folded back as if they had been suddenly broken. He fell in a long slide, momentum-borne and inert, and crashed at Elje's very feet.

She had her knife at his throat in a swift, lithe crouch before she saw that no knife was necessary. Bewildered, she looked up at Kern.

He stooped and took the wet blade from the man's hand, wiped it on his leather jerkin.

“Don’t look back, Elje,” he warned her harshly. “Sam? Sam!”

“It’s all right, Kern.” Sam Brewster’s voice had a dreadful sort of amusement in it. “I’m not—looking.”

Elje stared, speechless, into Kern’s face as the other mutant sauntered up to join them in the shelter of a heap of rock at the edge of the platform. Sam’s smile was thin and cold. The secondary lids veiled his eyes, but a gleam in their depths glittered even through the film and Kern looked hastily away.

“What—what is it?” Elje faltered. “What killed this man?”

“I did.” Sam was grinning without mirth. “Like this.”

He turned away, face lifted, scanning the turmoil overhead where men dived and soared on blood-dappled wings, clasped one another in deathly embraces and hurtled earthward with knives flashing between them. At the edge of the platform, only a dozen feet overhead, such a pair writhed in gasping, murderous combat. As they watched, one man freed his knife-hand and in the same motion drove the blade hilt-deep into the other’s chest!

The killer’s wings spread and stiffened in anticipation of what was to come, as his victim clutched convulsively at his shoulders in a last effort to save himself. For an instant one man’s wings supported them both. Then the dying man’s body went limp. Wings flaccid, he fell away from the blade and went hurtling downward through the mists, twisting and turning over while blood pumped from his chest.

The killer paused for a moment in midair, breathing in deep gasps and looking for another adversary. His glancing eyes crossed Sam Brewster’s. For an instant he hung there, panting for breath, gaze locked with Sam’s.

The knife dropped from his loosened fingers. Eyes still wide, he heeled over in the air stiffly. His wings broke backward and he fell after the man he had just killed. They vanished almost together into the fog below.

Sam laughed grimly. When he turned the secondary lids were closed again over his eyes.

“I can kill anyone who catches my eyes, when they’re open,” he said.

Elje did not understand the words, but his gesture was enough. She caught her breath softly and looked away in sheer instinctive revulsion from that deathly gaze.

“Elje, we’ve got to do something,” Kern said. “Now, while we can. We’ve got Sam. Kua and Byrna have their own powers, too. There’s no use waiting here to be killed. If only we could get away.”

“Where?” Elje asked somberly. “The Mountain could find us wherever we went.”

“We could go to the Mountain.” Kern’s voice was more confident than he felt. “If it’s so anxious to see us dead, then it must be afraid of us. Anyhow, that’s our only hope. Is there any way out except the way we came here?”

Elje gestured aloft. “Only up. And you can see how thick the vapors are.”

Kern glanced around the platform. There were perhaps fifty men remaining on their feet, waiting to be thrown into the last wave of the defense. He looked toward the cave-mouth and beckoned. Kua and Byrna hurried across the platform toward him, their faces pale and anxious.

“Kua,” he said. “A little while ago you found you could look through walls. Look up. Do you think you could tell which of those vapors up there are poisonous and which aren’t?”

Kua’s face lifted: her single eye narrowed. For a long moment no one spoke.

“No, I’m not sure,” she said. “I can see a long way through to the clear air. I can see that some of the fog flows in definite patterns, much thicker than the rest. But what’s poison and

what isn't—no one could tell that by looking, Kern."

"Is there a path through the places where the fog's thin?"

"Yes."

"We'll have to take a chance on it, then. Maybe if it's thin enough to breathe, we can get through."

Rapidly he told Elje what he hoped. "There are men enough left here to give us a chance if we fight our way. Sam and Kua are worth enough to be carried. I've never fought in the air and I wouldn't be much help, so I'll carry Byrna. It's worth trying, Elje. Better than waiting here to be killed."

"Yes." Elje's voice was hopeless. "Better to die that way than this. All right, Kern, we'll go."

She turned and shouted commands to the last men around her. A few minutes later the remnant of the rebel band went soaring into the air.

The platform fell away below. It was like plunging into a maelstrom of shouts and cries, groans, gasps for breath, the deafening beat of many wings. Blood rained about them, knives flashed and fell, bodies hurtled past toward the ground. With Byrna's light weight in his arms, Kern beat heavily upward. Confidence had suddenly begun to glow in him, against all reason. They would make it. He was irrationally sure of that.

And they did. But not all of them.

Sam Brewster was the one who fell. Almost at the last, when their depleted band had reached nearly the dome of the vaporous tent, a flung knife transfixed one of Sam's bearers between the wings. He screamed, arched backward, and fell. Someone beside him dived too late for the reeling basket-seat in which Sam rode. The mutant pitched forward into space and dropped without a cry.

It would have been suicide to dive back into that maelstrom of death in an effort to catch him. Sick at heart, Kern saw him fall twisting toward the ground. He saw, too, how man after man of the swarm around him stiffened and dropped after Sam on limp wings as the mutant's lethal gaze took his own escort of dead men around him to his death.

Then they plunged into the choking mists overhead, and no one had time to think of anything but his own breathing, his own urgent need to follow exactly in the wing-path of Kua's bearers as she guided them through the fog.

Like a gigantic thunderhead the Mountain lifted its clear, pale bulk into the zenith. The mind quailed from the very thought of such height; it seemed to lean forward over the fliers and hover for a monumental collapse that would crush the world.

When they drew close, Byrna shuddered in Kern's arms and turned like a child to clasp his neck and hide her face on his shoulder.

"I can feel it," she said in a muffled voice. "It's watching. It's trying to—to get into my mind. Don't think, Kern. Don't let it reach you!"

Kern was briefly aware of a hot, coiling ribbon of hatred that moved through his brain and was gone as his mind slammed its gates of thought against the intruder. It was not easy to force his wings to carry them onward when his whole mind rebelled against drawing any nearer to the Mountain. He saw revulsion on the faces around him too, and caught uneasy glances cast sideward at his face. Their pace had perceptibly slowed.

“I don’t like it either, Elje,” he said to the winged girl across the swimming void that flowed past far below. “But we’ve got to do it. What choice have we, except to be killed? They may be following us from the cave already. Our only hope’s to reach the Mountain where we *may* do a little damage before—” He did not finish. There was no need to finish.

Now they were so near the wall of opalescence rising like the end of the world before them that Kern could see their own reflections floating distorted high up on the face of the cliff.

“Is it glass?” he asked.

“No one knows.” Elje controlled a shiver. “No one who came close enough to find out ever returned. It may be just a—a solid mass. I don’t—” She had glanced across her shoulder to answer him. Now her gaze went further.

“They’re following,” she said in a dull voice. “If it is solid, we’re trapped.”

Kern looked back. In a dark mass like a low, level cloud on the horizon, the winged ranks of the enemy moved in their wake.

Kua suddenly pointed.

“Look ahead,” she said. “Up there on the cliff, to the left—is it a cave? I—why, it’s opening wider!”

Everyone looked eagerly. There was a moment’s silence. The Mountain too seemed to wait and listen. But Kern saw no change in the face of the cliff. Unbroken, unshadowed, opalescent, it lifted before them.

Wind sighed past them toward the cliff, ruffling their wings. The sigh grew stronger—was a rising sough of sound—a sough that soared to an ear-stunning shriek. Headlong they whirled toward the Mountain, helpless, drawn upon that sudden irresistible wind. Kern clutched Byrna tighter and fought his wrenched wings as the cliff rose up in his face, like a solid cloud.

Dimly he could make out the shape of the opening at the same moment it engulfed him. Stunned with surprise, he went tumbling into the cliffside on that sucking wind, half-blinded by the opalescent mist which filled the tunnel. It was like spinning through a solid, for the impalpable stuff they flew through was indistinguishable to the eye from the stuff of the Mountain itself.

Light dimmed behind them as they were drawn helpless in tumbling flight deeper and deeper into the heart of the cloud—the Mountain—there was no term for what it was they sped through.

The wind that bore them along slowed. The deafening noise of it fell and was a sigh, a whisper—silence. For an instant they hung in opalescent nothingness, gasping for breath. Then Kua’s voice sounded sweetly in the hush.

“Look back—look back! I can see the way we came. I can see it closing. Like water flowing together. No, like running sand.”

Kern ceased to hear her. For suddenly he was aware of an almost imperceptible thickening in the mist around him. Something not seen, but felt. A closing and a supporting, so that the weight of his body and Byrna’s no longer hung wholly upon his wings. A solidifying in the very air.

He could not move.

CHAPTER VII

Combat

Relentlessly the Mountain which had opened to receive them had closed again, gently and solidly. The little group of captives hung frozen in the very postures of flight, spread-winged, hair still blowing in a wind which no longer moved past them. They were frozen as if in a moment of eternal Now, as if time had ceased to move and their own motions had ceased with it.

And then before them in the opalescent cloud of the Mountain a thin coil of light began to glow.

Swiftly it grew clearer. And Kern looked with the eyes of the body upon that which he had seen before with the eyes of the mind. He felt the malevolence beat out at them before the fire itself came wholly into focus, strong hatred, curiously impersonal. It was the hatred of a Mountain, a cloud, not a human hatred.

The lazy, coiling ribbon moved through the solid fog, the foggy solid glass, somewhere ahead of the captives. It was impossible to gauge distances here, but the thing was close enough to see in every detail. Its slowly writhing coil that drew in and out of its own folds with a leisurely, never-ending motion. Its burning color that was hot to the eye and hot to the perceptive mind with the heat of its consuming hatred.

Something lay within the coils. It was drawing its ribbon-folds caressingly about that something. They could not yet see what.

For an instant or two the great, slow, burning thing moved in its long folds before them, blind and impersonal and hating. But then came a new change. Then it looked at them.

Spots of luminous darkness began to swim slowly through the coils. They came and went. Whenever a coil moved itself to face the captives in the solid glass, eye-spots swam upon that coil, flickering out again as the fiery curve moved on.

It watched. It waited and hated and was silent.

That which lay within it, bathed in the caressing coils, began to move. The coils altered their pattern to leave what they supported visible. And Kern felt a shock of emptiness within him that made the vision blur for a moment. When he looked again it was unmistakable and clear before him.

Bruce Hallam, lying quietly on the supporting coils, his eyes open and regarding them as impersonally as the eyes that came and went upon the ribbons of fire.

"This—" Bruce Hallam said clearly "—is my world."

The words came to them as if through empty air, with a cold clarity that allowed of no mistake. For it was not wholly Bruce Hallam who spoke. It was a voice of fire too. Hatred and blinding light coiled through the words as it coiled through the fog before their eyes. Two beings spoke with the single voice, but two beings who were now one.

Sudden memory flashed through Kern's mind. He saw the long-ago, far-away room again, where the little group of mutants had stepped from one universe to another. He saw Bruce opening his steel door upon a waiting world, searching it with his eyes, closing the door again. He understood now. Bruce had known. Somehow, he had known in the single glance which world held kinship for him and which did not.

Bruce, with his mutant's uncanny skill at creating out of any means at hand the more-than-machinery which would do his bidding, had recognized this world. Kern remembered with shock his own blindness when Elje had described to him what the Mountain's slaves, under its guidance, could do with any material at hand—how, when they still suspected Kern of complicity with the enemy, they had cleared his room of any matter out of which he might build a weapon to destroy them.

Yes, this world was Bruce Hallam's—not Kern's after all. A winged world, yes, but a world under dominance. And Bruce's was the dominant realm.

All this flashed through his mind with the swiftness of a single thought, while Bruce's coldly burning words still sounded in their ears. He was remembering how impersonal Bruce had always been, how remote from human feeling, when he heard the cold voice again.

"There is no place in my world for you," Bruce told them calmly. "There is room only for the winged people—and Me. You come from malleable flesh, a malleable heritage. I can not trust you here. My coming into the world made a cyclone here in the Mountain, drawing out forces better left untouched. I was helpless then. I could not save—myself—until I was out of your reach. The time has come to destroy the last remnants of those who defy me. And you mutants whose flesh I can not control must go with the rest."

He did not stir, but the coiling flame moved with sudden quickened speed, flowing toward them *through* the imprisoning glass which held the humans so inflexibly. Bruce, then, was only the voice of this dreadful duo. The ribbon of flame was the body.

A long loop of it moved lazily forward, falling gently like a silk ribbon through air. After it the fiery length followed gracefully, weaving in and out of its own folds, and within the folds, always caressed by them streaming over and around his body, Bruce Hallam moved too, rigidly, supported on the coiling loops, not a muscle of his own limbs stirring.

Kern watched them come. He had no idea what would happen when the burning coils touched the first human, but he could feel the white heat of its malevolence flow before it. Helpless, voiceless in the grip of the unyielding glass, he strained fiercely for—for—he did not know what. Only to be free to fight even uselessly against the oncoming enemy.

Sharply the thought in his mind broke in two. He had known this cleavage before, but the utter strangeness of it stunned him for a moment so that his thoughts went blank while something, *something* stirred incredibly through his body.

The old feeling of change, of unutterable newness, of an unguessed sense opening within him like nothing man ever knew before.

Three times he had known this feeling since he stepped into the winged world. Three times he had crushed it down, fearing and hating it for its threat of making him alien again, alien to the winged people he had hoped would be his own. But this time he did not fight. This time, in the violent, straining effort to break free, he broke instead some barrier which had until now held back the new thing, the *something* which had burgeoned relentlessly within him ever since he came within the Mountain's realm.

The glass walls that held him like a prisoner in ice grew dim and vanished. His companions pilloried in glass beside him wavered into darkness. He no longer felt the warmth of Byrna frozen in glass in his arms. Everything was dark—even the slow—coiling ribbons that looped leisurely toward him through solid substance.

And then out of that darkness came light. All about him came light. And it took a long moment for him to discover he was not seeing that light with eyes. He was seeing it—

incredibly, impossibly—with his whole body. He saw everything around him in one all-encompassing range.

“This is the way the Mountain sees,” he knew with sudden certainty. How he knew it was not clear; it was a knowledge that came with the new vision. He and the Mountain, they shared a common faculty.

Motion far away caught his fathomless attention and he was looking out through the clouded side of the Mountain and seeing, as if he stood before them, the flight of the oncoming winged men who had followed the fugitives from the eyrie. They were nearly here now, approaching the monstrous cliff as blindly as if they meant to dash themselves to death against it.

With the same all-embracing sight, Kern was aware of the people frozen around him into the glass, and of the looping coils that flowed toward them, and of Bruce Hallam, rigid as an image of stone, moving with the moving ribbons.

But they looked very different now. The people.

He knew their faces, the familiar outlines of their bodies, but he could see through the bodies with his new vision. And the appalling thing he saw was not the structure of bone and muscle and nerve which a part of his mind expected there. These things were only pale shadows upon the—the *other*.

The people were rings of flat, luminous color, disc upon disc of it, superimposed, overlapping, no two people with the same patterns or the same colors. And he knew that the muscular structure humans are aware of, the skeleton, the nerves, are only a part of what comprises them. Only a part—and not the part important to the Mountain. The Mountain ruled by other means.

Every flying man approaching outside the cliff had one thing in common with his fellows. Each was made up of ring after ring of colors, brilliant arcs and half-moons lying one upon another and in continual delicate shifting motion. But in each, and moving slowly over the rings, a circle of luminous darkness swung. Darkness like the eyes which swam up to the surface of the coiling ribbons that embraced Bruce Hallam. An eye—the eye of the Mountain.

That was the thing the Mountain used in them to transmit its commands, then. The point of contact in each man that made him a slave when the orders came.

There was no such eye in any of the people imprisoned around Kern. He saw his own body with this new vision, rings and discs of color like the rest, and with no dark, circling spot that meant the Mountain owned him.

The Mountain is a creature of glass, he told himself clearly. Its body is this opalescent stuff which is solid or gas as the Mountain wills. It can make tunnels and caverns like open mouths through it and close them again. And its brain, its motivating force, is the ribbon of fire, endless, revolving upon itself in the center. It has many strange senses. One of them I share now.

He thought: When we came here, we somehow brought on a cyclone of violent forces drawn from the Mountain itself. Because Bruce Hallam had an inhuman kinship with the entity which dwells here. But it was an entity so strong, so accustomed to mold the minds of its victims and use them like tools to create other tools, that we ourselves were reshaped without knowing it.

This strange new sense began very early to take shape in me. Kua reacted too, and Byrna. Sam? I don't know. He's gone. But as for me, I have changed.

Something stirred mysteriously through his flesh, and without the need to look down, Kern's horizon-circling vision told him that light had begun to glow in him—fire—long, rolling loops of fire that stretched with incredible flexibility *through* the solid glass imprisoning him.

The ribbon of fire upon which Bruce's body rode paused in its motion, hesitated, almost drew back. Kern felt dimly its surprise and its strange, inhuman hatred. But only dimly, for his own mind was too stunned with this final revelation to let any other feeling through.

Too malleable, he thought despairingly—flesh too malleable to hold its own form under the irresistible altering pull that was the Mountain. And now through the icy glass which held the humans rigid, two shapes of coiling flame turned lazily over and over—one shape supporting a human body and glowing incandescent with malevolence, the other still too amazed for emotion, but stretching its new limbs of fire with a sort of reluctant, voluptuous luxury as the endless ribbon rolled in convolutions of flame in and out of its own length. A strange, inhuman luxury, this, to stretch upon the firm, permeable glass, moving through it as light might move, in a dimension of its own.

Hatred like a blast of furnace-heat struck upon Kern's new awareness with an impact that jolted him out of this bewildering mental fog. Hate and fear. He had felt that blast before, invisibly in the voids of thought, and terror had come with it so that he fled blindly to escape. But this time fear did not follow after the hate. This time he welcomed conflict.

"Now we're equals—matched equals," he told himself, and felt even in this moment of danger and surprise the utter difference of his own mind through which thoughts moved slowly and clearly, like his new limbs through the solidity of the glass. If he had ever owned a body of flesh and blood, it was his no longer. If his mind had ever dwelt there and shaped its thoughts to the contours of brain and skull, they were shaped no longer. This was new, new, terrible and wonderful beyond human understanding.

Slow exultation began to burn in him as he rolled the great coils of fire which were his body toward that which until now had dwelt here alone. Now the Mountain had a double mind—if the fiery ribbon was indeed the mind of the thing—but moving still through a single gigantic body of opalescent glass. And within that vast body, the doubled mind moved upon itself in suicidal combat.

Hatred was a bath of flame that engulfed him as their farthest coiling loops touched—touched and engaged with sudden violence. But Kern was not afraid now, not repelled. With a surging lunge he tested the strength in that shape which was the twin of his own. The ribbons writhed and strained. Then they paused for a moment and drew back in mutual consent. And simultaneously, as if hurled by a single mind, lunged forward again.

This time the fiery limbs entangled until their full endlessly revolving lengths were wholly engaged with one another and the two identical shapes of rolling fire strove furiously together in a single knot that boiled with ceaseless motion.

Hatred burned and bubbled all around Kern's awareness as he strove coil against coil with the enemy. But it did not touch him any more. He felt no fear. And when he began to realize that he could not vanquish this being by strength alone, not even then did he feel fear. Emotion was gone from him. Coil by coil he tested the thing he strove with, and coil by coil he found it braced irresistibly against his greatest strength. He could not swerve it by a single loop.

But it could not swerve him. Matched in strength as they were in shape, the two creatures of flame lay for a moment upon the clouded ice, limb straining against limb in a perilous balance that permitted of no motion.

Then, very delicately, the awareness that had been Kern reached out with a sense he had not until this moment known he possessed, and touched the frozen body of Bruce Hallam. For he knew now that he and this enemy were too perfectly matched for either to prevail, unless one or the other found a lever by which his adversary could be overthrown.

Was it Bruce? Gently, and then with increasing pressure, he tried that rigid, unyielding body which had once been human. There was nothing—nothing. Not even the discs of overlapping color which the still-human exhibited to his new sight moved through Bruce's limbs. He was solid, unmoving, a shape of nothingness, and no sense could touch him. No, Bruce was not the source through which strength might be drained from the enemy.

What, then? Kern asked himself with passionless consideration. And the answer came clearly and unhurried, as if it had waited only this query to reply.

The winged men waiting outside the mountain—that was the answer.

Almost outstripping the thought, his sight and his strange new senses leaped to the surface of the Mountain. There the slaves hung on stretched wings, tilting to the updrafts from below, circling and soaring and waiting in mindless obedience for the command that would release them from their mental thrall.

Once he had seen them as winged humans fighting with fanatic violence. Now they were only shapes of overlapping discs, full of slowly turning motion, and in each the Eye of the Mountain swimming leisurely over the surface of the colors.

The Eye, he thought. The Eye!

Like a new, unguessed arm his awareness shot out and plunged into the nearest spot of darkness which swam over the colored discs. Plunged in—groped for contact—and tapped a source of flame. Up through the arm the flame leaped, and into Kern's body of matching flame. Almost imperceptibly he felt the straining coils of the enemy give beneath the pressure of his own.

Another, and another and another of the flying shapes gave up its tiny source of fire, and Kern's strength grew with each. The combat which had hung motionless in mutual violence now writhed suddenly into action again as the balance was destroyed. But the fury of the enemy seemed to double too as it felt itself bent backward upon its own fiery coils.

What had been combat before the stasis turned into abrupt turmoil now. The two ribbons of flame convulsed together, lashing and whipping into an incandescent fury of struggle. And Kern knew in a timeless moment or two that even this was not enough. He must find some last source of power to give him the victory.

The arm with which he had robbed the flying men of their Eyes groped, plunged deeper, seeking more power within them. And amazingly, found it.

For an instant Kern could not understand why strength in a full, deep tide flowed into him as the light began to fail in his enemy. And then he understood, and a surge of triumph for the first time glowed through his whole being.

For in giving its strength to its slaves, that it might command them, the Enemy had opened a channel which ran both ways. And in draining the slaves, Kern found himself draining the Enemy itself—reaching back and back through each slave into the source from which that strength came.

From a score, a hundred channels, the Mountain must have felt its own power drain away. Its power, but not its hate. Kern could feel the sheer, inhuman malevolence burning about him in great washes of flame as the strength of the coils against his grew steadily weaker. The fire sank down within it, dimming and fading as the creature bled its own power away—bled flame, and slowly, slowly died!

The turning ribbons of light no longer moved against Kern's awareness. His limbs engulfed not a luminous involuted band, but a thin, pale hatred which fell apart as he drew his own body back. It fell apart into a tiny rain of droplets, each of them dancing with its own seed of hate. Twinkling, fading, and the hatred fading with them, until they were gone.

Kern felt change all about him, in the substance of the Mountain itself. A vast, imponderable shifting of the clouded glass, a falling apart of the atoms which composed it, as its soul of fire had fallen. The opalescent stuff was a fog—a mist—a thin, dissipating gas which no longer supported him. The cold of clear air struck terribly upon his fiery limbs as the Mountain dissolved from about him. He convulsed upon himself in a knot of flame that seemed to consume itself and to cease—to cease—

Everything was blank around him. Neither dark nor light, but void. He hung motionless upon nothing. He was no longer a shape of flame. He was no longer a shape of flesh. He was nothing, nowhere.

This was infinity, where time was not. For milleniums, he thought, he drifted there upon oblivion. Milleniums, or moments!

From far away a something began to be. He did not recognize it—he knew only that where nothingness had been, now there was a something. He heard a call. That was it, a call, a sound of incredible sweetness.

A voice? Yes, it was a voice of sheer melody, saying a name. He did not know the name.

"Kern—Kern," it cried. The syllable had no meaning to him, but the sweetness of the voice that shaped it gradually began to rouse him from his stupor. Over and over the syllable sounded, and then with a sudden blaze of awareness he knew it for what it was.

"My name!" he thought with amazement. "My own name!"

The mind came back into him, and he knew. Like Bruce Hallam, he had hung frozen and empty from the touch of the all-consuming fire which had been himself. Like Bruce, he had been emptier than death.

"Kern, Kern, come back," wailed the voice of impossible sweetness. He knew it now. Byrna's voice, lovely as a siren's magical song, summoning him back to the living.

Slowly, slowly, he felt warmth return to him. Slowly he drew his mind together again, and then his body came back around him, and with infinite effort he lifted the eyelids that shut out the world.

He lay on a hillside in the full warm tide of the sunlight which poured down from an empty sky. There was no Mountain any more. No vertiginous thunderhead of glass towering up the zenith, casting its pale shadow across the world. Someone bent over him, holding her wings to shut the sun's glare from his eyes. Her wings glistened.

Tentatively he flexed his own. And then strength came back with a magical rush to him, and he sat up with a strong beat of his pinions that almost lifted him from the ground. All around him smiling faces watched in the shadow of their wings.

And he knew that he was free at last, and the winged world was free. And he was no longer alien.

[The end of *Way of the Gods* by Henry Kuttner]