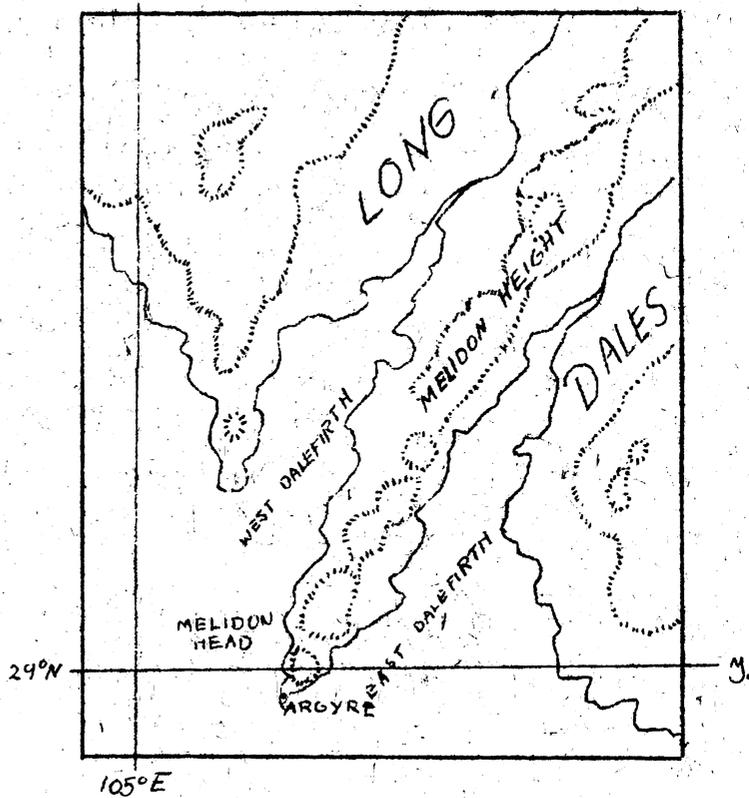


The Zed

NO. 203--SAPS 63



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Between the Long Dales is Melidon Height. Where the Dales sink toward the sea Melidon rises higher, breaking at last in a sheer cliff of marble that is pale yellow like arzan honey. Here in the old days the spotted mountain-lilies clung to a rain-worked marble crag, that is now squared and planed and hollowed by the quiet might of atomic cutters. This is Argyre, home of ten generations of Eskils.

To Arin Eskil it was home and not home. Before his parents' death he had seen it in a child's perspective, a place where he had played and chased scarlet lizards and wheedled seed-rolls from the cook "just this once." Later, in his vacations from school, it was the starting point for long riding or boating trips. It had seemed natural that his father was always quiet at such times. Then, after the catastrophe that had killed both his mother and father, he had not wanted to go back. Argyre had been closed. Arin had spent his vacations with his uncle, or with friends from school.

Now, having finished school — after two years of postgraduate courses taken mostly because he could not come to any other decision — he had come home. Argyre had been opened and refurbished, the furniture unsealed from plastic envelopes, the beds made up with well-aired linens, the larders stocked and the wine-cellars opened. Arin had engaged the former butler and asked to have as many of the old servants as possible. But it could never be the same.

He stood looking south over the sunset sea from the terrace outside the room that was now his own. A memory came to him of a sunset at the end of a vacation, when he had climbed to this terrace from the one below, pulling himself up the thick gnarled copper-wisteria vines. His father had looked out and seen his face between the balusters, called him to come into the bedroom. It had been a room full of treasures and mysteries. He had been permitted to choose between jet and emerald shirt-studs, and to watch the complicated tying of the black velvet sash that held his father's green and gold caftan open to a precise eight centimeters. Then Arin had noticed a diamond sunburst in the jewel case and asked his father whether he would wear that. But it was time for Arin to have his bath and dress for dinner. As he remembered now, it must have been his first formal dinner, and he had swaggered proudly into the parlor in his new white caftan just as the grownups finished their cocktails and were ready for dinner. He could not recall who their guests had been.

Arin turned away from the darkening sea and went into the bedroom that was his own now. "Gonth," he said to the waiting valet, "do you remember my father's green and gold caftan? What's become of it?"

"I believe it's in the storage closet, sir."

"I'll wear that tonight."

Arin glanced at his shirt studs. They were jet. But, as a boy, he'd thought the emerald ones more dashing. He found the others and exchanged them. Gonth returned with the caftan and helped him into it, tied the velvet sash, adjusted the width of the caftan's opening to a precise eight centimeters. Arin tried to think what shoes and trousers his father had worn that night; but it did not matter, they must have been much the same. Where was the diamond star?

"Not tonight, son. Your uncle doesn't appreciate it." That was what his father had said. Curious. Well, Uncle Flarn was here tonight, so let it wait. He looked into the mirror self-consciously. He had the unmistakable bony, narrow-chinned Eskil face; tonight it seemed not quite his own.

"I believe Mr. Flarn Eskil has arrived," the valet said.

"Thank you, Gonth. That'll be all for now." Arin hurried down the stairs.

"Breyd!" gasped his uncle. And then, recovering himself: "Sorry, Arin. I suppose I hadn't realized until now that you're really grown. I thought for a moment it was your father. He was dressed just as you are now, the last time I saw him."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, you were just a little thing then, in your first caftan. You'd never been to a dinner party before. Dear me, how time has passed since then!"

"It certainly has," Arin agreed. "I can hardly remember my first caftan. It was yellow, I think."

"Yes, indeed. It was yellow with a damask-weave border."

Arin tabbed that for future reference, and offered his uncle a drink before dinner. They went into the parlor, which faced inward on a lighted courtyard, and cocktails were served. Later, since the evening held warm, they went up to the roof garden for dinner. It had always been the pleasantest part of the house, Arin thought. Brilliantly colored lamps made a roof of light. The Dalefirths on the east and west showed milky under the rich light of neighboring S Doradus. White moths, their wings eyed with metallic blue, fluttered above the table. From away back on Melidon Height, among the pear and olive orchards, came the songs of a mocking-bird.

It seemed to Arin that there could be nothing finer than to sit here on the roof of Argyre, eating the dinner he had ordered, in company with the guest he had invited; to be the master of this fine estate; to be a man in the house that had been his father's fathers' before him. He realized that he had been speaking of one thing after another, such as the wisteria growing up to the bedroom terrace and the napery damasked in the patters drawn by his grandmother, explaining to his uncle how each thing made him feel at home again; but the important thing, which he had missed, was really that he sat in the seat of his fathers. It seemed very important that he make Uncle Flarn understand this. He tried, and noticed with curious detachment that he was stumbling and slurring his words. It was all rather amusing, really. He had to laugh at it. Good old Uncle Flarn didn't mind. He'd been happy to sit there quietly eating and listening sympathetically. What a fine listener Uncle Flarn was!

Arin realized in sudden horror that he had hardly eaten a thing, while he matched his uncle glass for glass. He had been talking while his uncle ate. He was becoming quite drunk. And his uncle was putting another one of those sympathetic, interested questions, to keep him talking and drinking . . .

Secret hiding places? "Yes, the place is full of them," Arin said. "But you must know where they are. You grew up here too, after all."

"I made a couple of my own," Uncle Flarn said. "You may have found one. There was one I left a Kallidarian coin in, a dekan dated with my birth-year."

"Why, yes — I remember that dekan. I called it my buried treasure. It ought to be there still. I knew I'd never be without money, because I could always take it and have it changed, and it would make me rich."

"You must have made some hiding-places," suggested his uncle.

Arin thought. He knew he hadn't left the dekan where he found it. Where had he put it? But all he could think of was the copper-wisteria he had climbed, and his father's emerald shirt-studs. If he had a secret place, it ought to be secret, anyway.

"It ought to be secret, anyway," he mumbled.

"What's secret? Could you find it again?" his uncle insisted gently.

Arin rebelled suddenly against the probing. Even if he had a secret place, he wouldn't tell, but he was afraid he might remember and let it escape him. "A lizard ran away with it," he said at random, and puched aside the glazed kumquats to put his head on the table. His grandmother's damask design made a cool pattern on his forehead.

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There are no paths from Melidon Head to the sea. When the people of Argyre wish to swim they go by antigravity craft. These also make good swimming-floats. Arin set his raft down in the East Dalefirth on that morning and slid into the gentle water. At first he paddled gently, not wishing to aggravate his headache; but after a time he began to feel better and swam vigorously in broad circles. When he was done he took the raft up to his bedroom terrace and homed it to the hangar. In his bedroom, he drank a cup of coffee, then ate a papaya and a slice of toast with arzan honey.

There was something he must remember. The thought came to him that it was something about his uncle. At least he wouldn't be back at Argyre for another week; time enough to remember where the hiding-place was and decide why Uncle Flarn mustn't find out about it. And to decide what had been disturbing about the matter of the color of his first caftan. These were all unpleasant matters, and not to be thought about on a fine morning.

Something pleasant to think of? Why, of course! There was certainly something pleasant! Lhyrphril was coming today, his Mathyran roommate. Perhaps, even, he could get advice from Lhyrphril. Arin was sure something was wrong, but he did not yet know what.

Lhyrphril and Arin sat all afternoon talking on the main terrace where the copper-wisteria grew. The Mathyran ruffled the blue-gray fur back and forth along his jawbone as he listened and made occasional suggestions. It was his opinion that Flarn wanted his nephew to remember as little as possible of that night so many years ago, for fear that the dead Breyd Eskil had given his son a parting message that the boy had not understood at the time. For it was clearly the last time Arin had seen his father. The antigravity ship whose explosion had killed Breyd and his wife could well have been engineered by Flarn. Motive was the chief question; and Flarn might be afraid Arin would learn that motive.

"It wasn't the very last time I saw him, of course," Arin said. "We all had breakfast here on this terrace the next morning -- Father, Mother, and I -- and then they took me over to Port Eskil to catch my spaceship. I made the trip back to school alone. It was the first time I'd done that and I felt very grown up."

"And what did you talk about while you had breakfast here?" asked Lhyrphril.

"Oh, I don't know. The usual sort of thing. How we'd go deep-sea fishing next vacation, or something. Wait, though. . . There was one thing. . ."

"Yes, here's how it was. I asked Father why Uncle Flarn didn't like his diamond star, so that he hadn't worn it the night before. He said my uncle would like to have the star himself. And then I said if he ever wanted to hide it, I had a good place that nobody knew about, one I'd made myself. . ."

Arin crossed the terrace and felt behind the thick stem of one of the wisteria vines. There was the loose triangle of marble that had come out one day when he tried to climb: a piece, maybe that the builders had accidentally knocked out and cemented back in place. He teased it out as he had done so long before, and found the recess between the timbers that supported the interior heating channels.

"This place is all a shell, you know, with the inside walls supporting it," he said over his shoulder to Lhyrphril. "It would all fall down if that were taken away." He reached into the hole. There was the Kallidarian dekan, all right, and he had felt something under it. He reached in again and brought out a package sealed in many layers of plastic film.

Inside the package, when he spread it out on the table, was a roll of transcription tape and his father's diamond star. He turned the star over, curiously. On the back was engraved Lord of Eskilstead and master of Argyre, followed by a list of names. The last was his father's.

"Lord of Eskilstead! Of the whole planet?" wondered Arin.

"The tape. Perhaps that explains," suggested Lhyrphril,

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"My son, I may be taking a needless precaution. If you have found this while I am still alive, bring me the tape at once. Do not play it any further.

"If I have died a natural death, destroy the tape without playing it through.

"But if you have any thought that I may have been murdered,

listen carefully. Your own life may be in danger."

"O my prophetic soul," quoted Lhyrphril. Arin made a shushing motion. The tape went on.

"If you have looked at my diamond star, you will have guessed that you should have inherited all of Eskilstead, rather than merely Argyre and its grounds. I have been blackmailed for many years, giving up one tract after another to ensure the silence of my brother Flarn. When we were young, and this seems a great while ago, both Flarn and I were in love with the same girl. She inclined toward me. Flarn told me, and at the time I could believe him, that the girl would marry him instead if he told her how I kept a woman when I was in college. It was true, and he could prove it. He asked me for the Arzan Isles and Merrowland as the price of his silence. It seemed little enough, and so it was done.

"He was not satisfied, but asked for more and more. Each time I was afraid that I might lose my Maritta. Even worse than my loss of her, I thought, was the pain she would suffer. Until at last there was only Argyre itself remaining to me.

"Maritta believed that I had lost the other lands in business ventures. I never discussed business with her, and she came to believe that I was ashamed to let her know what a bad businessman I was. But I could not let Argyre go, and so I told her the truth at last.

"She laughed when I told her. She might have broken with me at first, she told me, but after your birth nothing could have taken her away. And -- and then she cried, to think that I loved her better than all of Eskilstead. You will not think worse of me, I know, if I tell you that I cried too. I had not understood how much she loved me.

"If my brother has killed me, there may be no way to prove it by the time you find this transcription. But you may be able to blackmail him in your turn. I have transcribed one of our conversations, and I'll dub it onto this tape. Flarn knows that it exists. I hope I can use it myself. If I have not done so, he'll try to get it without your knowing what it is, or if he can't do that he may simply try to kill you. He would inherit Argyre after you.

"I hope you never need to hear this, Arin, but if you do -- goodbye, and good luck."

Lhyrphril turned off the transcription and turned to comfort his friend. It was then that the butler came in.

"Mr. Flarn sent a case of arzan honey, as he always does after a visit, sir," said the butler.

Arin leaped up. "And no one ever understood why there was honey scattered all over the wreck of the antigravity ship! Take it far away -- send for a bomb squad!"

Lhyrphril stood up slowly, ruffling the fur along his jawbone. "A gift from the Arzan Isles," he said softly. "Arin, did I get around to telling you that I stepped from college straight into a job with the Criminal Investigation Section of the Patrol? I rather think Eskilstead will be all yours soon."

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